

ENEMIES + LOVERS

HOT HUNKS

Steamy Romance Collection

Challenging Cott

USA Today Bestselling Author

NATALIE ANN

CHALLENGING COLT

ENEMIES TO LOVERS

NATALIE ANN

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BLURB

Colt Baxter had an idea and goal of what he wanted out of his career. Champion of the underdog? Protector of the innocent? Guardian of the law? Yeah, all of those things. Instead he finds himself fitting the mold of what most people hate about lawyers. Including the one woman he wants to get to know better.

Nikki Brewster has worked hard her whole life right alongside her father. And when his retirement career as a pub owner is in jeopardy from a frivolous lawsuit, she goes into battle mode. No one stands in her way at those times. It is just her and her father and that's all she's ever known. The last thing she has time for is the slick lawyer representing those trying to take everything away from the only man she's ever loved.

PROLOGUE

“**H**ave you talked to Stan Brewster yet?”

Colt Baxter looked up at Janet Steele standing in his doorway. She was a partner in the firm he’d been employed with since he’d passed the bar. He had high hopes of moving up and becoming a partner here and in the past few years they’d been squashed more than a kid’s fist hitting their first birthday cake.

Dangling the carrot in front of his face? Yep, been going on for longer than he cared to admit. If he could work up the nerve, he’d leave this all behind him, but starting over was daunting too.

“No. It’s on my list of things to do this week.”

“You need to do it today. Put some pressure on them.”

He put the pen down that was in his hand and stared at Janet. She was probably in her fifties and attractive. Hard not to be with the amount of work she’d had done over the years.

She’d gotten to the top by being ruthless, heartless, and finding a lot of bedmates.

She’d wanted Colt to be in that bed of hers at one point and it’d been a tricky situation to get out of, with her casually hinting his partnership was on the horizon.

That was almost two years ago and he'd managed to slip away without ruffling too many feathers.

Or so he thought until he started to get handed what he felt were some cases challenging his morals. It was one thing he'd never wanted to do in his career and lately it seemed like it was all he did.

"This is getting out of hand," he said. "Did it ever occur to you that there was a reason Stan was representing himself?"

"Partnerships are offered to those that bring in the money. This was an easy cash cow in your name," she said, smirking at him.

So she thought she was doing him a favor? Hardly. More like she knew he hated frivolous lawsuits and this was one that was killing him inside. Was it a punishment for not warming her sheets? He had no clue and didn't want to even think of it now.

"It's not easy when it's the guy's livelihood. He's representing himself because he can't afford a lawyer."

"Colt," she said in that condescending voice of hers, then moved into his office and took a seat across from him. "There is no reason to go to court for this. That is what his insurance is for. Easy peasy and move onto the next."

"He doesn't want his rates to go up or to go bankrupt trying to pay this out," Colt said. "He's barely holding it together with the bad press now."

"And he wouldn't have had the bad press if he'd just settled months ago when this happened. You knew our client was going to leak this if Stan held out too long."

He narrowed his eyes. "At your suggestion."

"If it gets the case closed then it does. You should have been the one to do that. He's our client and yet you sound like you are working for the Brewsters."

"I know who I'm working for," he said. "Now, let me get it done."

Janet got up and walked out of his office with a shit-eating grin on her face, knowing she got her way. Like she always did.

But unless he wanted to walk out on his job, he had to do it. When had he become such a coward afraid to take that risk? Had he gotten so comfortable here? Or was it the thought of losing everything he'd worked for, all the progress he'd made toward that partnership where he'd be able to choose his own cases?

He picked the phone up and placed the call to the man he dreaded talking to because the truth was, he wished he were working for the Brewsters and could nail his own firm's ass to the wall for this bullshit. He wondered how much longer he could go on like this when he hated everything this place seemed to stand for.

LAST ONE STANDING

Four Months Later

“YOU LOOK HAPPY.”

Colt turned to see his mother standing there with a big grin on her face.

“I am. That’s an odd statement.”

“Come on, Colt. You haven’t been truly happy in years and you know it. This past year less than normal. I wondered if it had to do with your siblings all finding people and you being the last one standing.”

He laughed. His younger brother, Jake, and older brother, Grey, both got married in the past six months and the youngest of the group, his sister, Alexa, got engaged less than two months ago.

He’d been in relationships over the years, so it wasn’t as if he’d been lonely, but he hadn’t had time for a serious one in a while. Nor was he looking.

He’d been burned enough in his personal life that when the fire started in his professional one, he just knew he couldn’t pass those flames around.

Half his relationships didn't last because of the time and dedication his job required. Even if it was a job he'd come to despise.

"That is hardly a reason for me to not be happy. I'm glad for them. Thrilled they all found someone."

"I realize that now. And also that it was your job that had been making you unhappy, but you never said a word. Why?"

"No reason to," he said. "We all have jobs in our lives that could cause that."

"I understand you can't talk about your cases to us," she said.

"No," he said, smiling. "But as I told you all a month ago, it was a moral and ethical decision. I didn't like the cases that were being taken in the firm nor did I like what I was being assigned."

"We were a little disappointed in the Brewster case," his mother said. "That wasn't like you."

"That had been the tipping point," he said. He'd never told them that before, never had a reason to, but he was close to his family and they knew what he wanted in his life. He'd thought he'd had it years ago. "I didn't want the case. I told Janet that, but she didn't care. I didn't always have a choice of the cases I got."

"You made a lot of money at that firm."

"Money isn't everything," he said. "Not when I felt I was getting a reputation. Not a good one either."

"I'm sure you'll get a much better one at the Mathews Law Firm," she said. "And I'm proud of you for going there. It's not easy to get hired at such a reputable place or feel like you are the new guy."

Mathews Law was a high-end law firm that had been started years ago by Thomas Mathews who was now a judge for Saratoga County. His youngest son, Ryan Mathews, currently ran the firm. There was talk of taking

on partners as it grew, but Thomas had always had visions of his sons running the place.

But his oldest son, Lucas, oversaw the legal department at Albany Medical Center. He'd even represented Colt's brother Grey in one of those frivolous lawsuits that Colt hated so much. Colt and Lucas worked together and got the suit tossed, and those were the things he wanted to do with his career. Not be an ambulance chaser that his last firm was starting to be known as.

And when the Brewster case finally ended after seven long months, which no doubt had seemed like a lifetime to Stan and his daughter, Nikki, Colt knew he couldn't do it again. Especially after those hateful words thrown in his face by Nikki Brewster on the day that Stan finally had no choice but to let his insurance company's lawyers take over and settle.

By then it was easy enough and the lawyers were willing to throw an offer out and Colt's clients were so desperate for the cash—the money hungry bastards—that it was accepted and over with.

What wasn't over for Colt was the hit to his pride and the sickness in his stomach.

He'd called Ryan the next week. They were friends and had been to parties at each other's homes. Not only that, his brother Grey was a friend and colleague of Dr. Jack Reynolds who was Ryan's best friend. There was six degrees of separation going on and he felt comfortable enough to reach out.

"It's not. When I called Ryan and told him I was looking to move on, he'd been shocked. He also knew the type of cases I was getting and it's not what they represent there. I worried he'd think I was after that."

"But he knew it wasn't you?" his mother asked.

"Yeah. He hadn't wanted to be that guy to steal someone away if it was what I was looking for."

He and Ryan had a few long talks on what Mathews wanted and were looking for. It was exactly what Colt had dreamed of when he was going to law school. He'd gotten lost when he took his first job hoping to change the world.

Yes, his mother was right. He'd made a lot of money where he was. He was working his way up to a partnership but didn't like the strings attached to it either. Toward the end, those strings were getting longer rather than shorter on top of it.

At thirty-five years old, he knew it was now or never to get out since he'd be essentially starting over. There was no guarantee of a partnership at a family-owned firm and he had to decide if having that title was even worth it.

In the end, he realized it wasn't. It was more important that he be able to lay his head on his pillow at night and fall asleep without a bottle of antacids first.

So far, this past month, he'd been able to.

"Your father and I are happy for you and more so that you're happy," she said again. "But that doesn't explain why you are sitting out here on the deck by yourself."

His mother was having an end of the summer dinner for everyone. "I'm the first one here," he said, smiling at her.

"Grey and Sierra pulled in a few minutes ago. I'm sure Jake and Rachel will be here soon. Alexa called and said they'd be here shortly. I guess Lisa was supposed to have visitation with Maggie this morning, but she hadn't shown up yet."

He snorted. At least that was one feel good case he'd had in the past year. His sister's fiancé went for full custody of his daughter and he'd gotten it. Family law had never been what Colt thought he'd do, but he found he enjoyed it.

"You had no timeline on dinner anyway," he said. "And I enjoy sitting here on the deck. You know that."

"I do. I also know you love to argue so I figured you'd be in there talking current events with your father and brothers soon."

"I'll save my arguing for later. Or at least busting on my brothers. Maybe I've gotten soft."

"Never," she said. "This dinner is kind of a celebration for the start of my kids' lives."

"They all have new starts of a sort," Colt said, agreeing.

"So do you," she said.

"I suppose. It does feel good to put that behind me. Not sure what direction I'm going in now since I haven't been there long."

"Ryan will hand over what he feels is the best for you and you know it. Do you have to pick a field and stick to it there?"

"No. Things will fall into place soon enough. I'm just doing little things and helping out at the moment."

"Cases will come your way," his mother said. "Just give it time."

"It's fine. I'm getting the feel for how things are done there and it's different than I'm used to. In a good way. Ryan has me working with him on a big case and that's okay with me. I just have more time on my hands than I'm used to."

"Do you feel like you are the lowest level attorney there?" she asked. "I know how that must bother you."

He thought it would but it wasn't. "No. Ryan is about my age, he worked hard to get where he is, he knows me as a person and how I am in the courtroom too."

"But he's never worked with you," she pointed out.

"Exactly. I'm taking this to mean he is getting a feel for me before he decides what he wants to give me. They are about finding people's strengths there. It's all good. As you said, I'm happy right now."

And honestly, that is what it was all about in his mind.

THE WRONG IMPRESSION

Nikki was anything but happy when she walked into Mathews Law Firm the Friday before Labor Day. This was the last thing she needed. Thankfully she was going back to work next week, but her summer income was gone like all the wishes her father had. Even her extra income throughout the school year had vanished like a genie back in the bottle after the wish was granted. Only there were no wishes coming true in her life any time soon.

For years she'd worked for her father's pub. It'd been a dream of his when he retired from the fire department. He'd worked hard his whole life and then it felt like a sucker punch to lose it all for something he didn't do. Nothing more than having the wrong staff working for him on the wrong night.

Her father started the pub five years before he retired and managed to keep it running because he didn't need the income. As long as he broke even and kept others employed, he was happy while he built up his retirement vision.

That vision of his came crashing down when they closed the doors almost two months ago and were getting the building ready to sell. At least once it was sold her father

wouldn't have that expense and could have some money in his pocket again.

Unlike her. After the emotional upheaval of the past year, she needed to take this summer off to help her father close down and sell off what they had left and get the place ready.

But she felt the pinch not having that income this summer or the tips from filling in where she was needed.

She could have gotten another job as a waitress over the summer break and then tried to do it on the weekends when school started back up, but she was trying to hold off.

High school kids were impressionable and having their math teacher working in a bar or waiting tables might give the wrong impression if it got out or it was the wrong establishment in some of the parents' eyes. Waiting tables at her family's business wasn't looked down on. But working at another bar might be.

And the last thing she needed was a speeding ticket that she'd gotten weeks ago because she wasn't paying attention.

If she'd gotten the ticket in the city of Albany, she might have gotten out of it. Many knew her name; they knew her father where he'd been an Assistant Fire Chief before he retired. They frequented his pub in Guilderland...when it was open.

But nope. She got it going to her classroom in Bethlehem, and since she didn't really know anyone there, there was no getting out of the ticket, nor would she try to throw her father's name around. Why would she now when his name didn't carry any clout or favorable thoughts after being run through the news?

So instead she remembered that one of the women that lived in her apartment complex worked at this law firm and she asked her if they could do something about it.

Emma was a law clerk and said the clerks did all the work. They'd get it taken care of...at a cost.

That cost was two hundred dollars for the fine and three hundred for legal fees. It was still cheaper than the hit to her insurance because the fine would have been there anyway.

She parked her car and went into the building of the posh office. Maybe she could have had someone else do it for cheaper, but this was easier and now it would be over with.

“Can I help you?” the woman at the desk said.

“Nicole Brewster. I’ve got an appointment with Emma Ellis.”

“Have a seat and I’ll let her know you’re here.”

She turned, found a chair, sat and hoped to hell this didn’t take long. She hated lawyers’ offices and more so hated lawyers.

They were all out for a buck, not giving one shit about right and wrong.

Yep, they preached the law and blah, blah. But what about ethics, morals and the little guy?

“Nikki, thanks for stopping in to sign everything.”

“No problem,” she said, standing up.

“Come on back to my office. I don’t have the paperwork yet. I need to get it from the lawyer.”

“Lawyer?” she asked. “I thought you did all the work and it was ready to go.”

“Have a seat. Yes, I did. But a lawyer has to sign off on it and I haven’t gotten it back. I think Colt has it, but let me track him down.”

Chills ran down her spine when she heard that name.
“Colt?”

“Colt Baxter. He’s new here. Just a little over a month or so. Anyway, I think it ended up on his desk a few days ago. I’ll be right back.”

Of all the rotten luck. How did she end up having him take care of this for her? That was probably why it cost as much as it had. She’d bet he doubled the price if he

recognized her name. As long as she didn't have to see him, she didn't care.

But of course she didn't get that wish because that stupid genie wasn't coming out of the bottle for her.

Worst of all, when Colt walked through the door with Emma she felt her heart racing and it wasn't just from hatred, but attraction. Why?!



"NIKKI," Colt said, coming forward. He'd recognized the name when the ticket came across his desk last week. He didn't have to do much except sign off when Emma got him everything, but he'd held onto it because he wanted a chance to see the woman who spewed so much hatred at him the last time he saw her.

He wanted to apologize. He needed to.

He'd wanted to do it months ago when the case closed, but he'd had Janet in the room with him smirking that look of hers that rubbed everyone the wrong way. He'd sat there quietly and then went back to his office wanting to slam shit around.

He wouldn't have given Janet the satisfaction of that though.

But damn, it'd felt good to hand in his resignation to her and see her shocked look when he said where he was going.

"Colt," she said, almost snarling. He didn't expect any differently.

"I didn't realize you two knew each other," Emma said.

"Unfortunately," Nikki said.

He held back the sigh. "Could we talk privately for a minute?"

"I just need my papers to sign," Nikki said. "Then I'll get out of your way for good."

Emma's phone buzzed at her desk and she moved to answer it, then said, "I'll be right there. You guys can just stay here. I've got to see Melanie."

He wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth that he had a few minutes alone with her and was going to take advantage of it.

"What is it you needed to say?" she asked, crossing her arms and staring him down.

Her brown hair was in a ponytail and swinging about her head. She was standing there rigid like she always was. Normally by her father's side though. Stan was the quieter of the two of them, Nikki normally having to be told to calm down.

He liked that she was feisty.

That she was standing up for her family.

That she knew it was all bogus and had no problem letting her voice be heard.

He liked her...personally. And wondered if that made it all the worse in his eyes, what was happening.

But he'd been in no position before to tell her what he really thought of what was going on. Not without getting fired or possibly being blacklisted from other firms when it got out. There were things you didn't do and that was one of them. Tell the defendant they were right and you wanted to help them out instead.

"I want to apologize."

"What?" she asked, clearly shocked.

"I'm sorry for everything. I was doing my job and I didn't like it."

"No one says you couldn't walk away," she said.

"That's not how it works," he said. "And I did once I could. You have to understand that even if I did prior, someone else would have had the case and they would have done the same thing. Maybe even worse."

He believed that. He'd pushed things off longer hoping their client would get fed up and take the first thing offered

when the time came, and he did. Had they pushed more and earlier, their client might have been greedier and have gone for a bigger settlement.

Even Janet was ready for it all to be done by then and as much as it looked bad on him to have it take so long, he did what he could to lessen things for the Brewsters. Not that they'd ever understand or believe him. Why would they?

"That's your opinion," she said. "So what, you didn't bring in as much as they wanted and canned you? That's how you ended up here? Sounds like justice to me."

He had that coming. It was no different than her calling him lower than the scum in a chemical filled pond when she slammed out of the door. One of her more colorful descriptions, he had to admit.

"No. You can believe what you want, but your case was the last straw for me. I didn't go into law to be an ambulance chaser and that is what it felt like was happening with me."

"So you left because you didn't like having to work our case? That's what you're trying to tell me?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Yes. However, I don't expect you to believe it."

"I don't." She held her hand out. "Just give me the papers to sign and I'll get out of your way."

"On one condition," he said. He was going for broke on this. He had nothing to lose.

"I think that might be called blackmail," she said, her lips twitching.

"Not really," he said, grinning. "I am sorry for what happened and I want to have a chance to tell you and your father that."

"You think my father wants to see you?" she asked. "Now I know you're delusional."

"Maybe I am. I'm a good judge of character and I know you're very protective of your father."

"He's all I've got."

He wanted to know her story there but couldn't ask. He wouldn't right now. He hoped to find out though.

"How about you let me take you to dinner and explain." He held his hand up when she went to open her mouth. "If at the end of that dinner you still don't want me to talk to him, then you got a free meal out of it. I'll even let you pick the place if you want to hit my wallet hard."

She hesitated a minute. "I want to just throw it back in your face, but I'm curious to see what you think you can say to me to make me hate you any less than I do. I bet it's more about the fact you can't live with yourself."

There were days he did wonder how he could live with what he'd done or caused someone. Then he justified it by saying if he didn't do it, someone else would. No, it wasn't right, and he knew it, but it was his job—one he'd started to loathe—and made the move to change that.

It wouldn't absolve the guilt he felt for the Brewsters' case or others, but this one was by far the worst he'd felt personally.

"You can ask me all of that at this dinner if you want," he offered.

She snorted. "Persistent, aren't you?"

"Aren't all lawyers?" he asked.

"Which is why I hate lawyers."

"I can share that sentiment at times," he admitted.

She laughed. "For that statement alone, I'll agree to dinner. Now give me those papers to sign and get out of here."

He handed them over. "Do I get your number or do I have to wait for you to contact me to set it up?"

Nikki signed her name and then handed everything back. "Tomorrow night. That's your only option. If you can't make it, then it's not meant."

"I'll be there," he said. "Tell me where and the time."

She waited a second and said, "677 Prime at six. Make it happen. I'm in the mood for a steak."

He laughed. "I'll call and make sure I can get reservations before you leave this building." He pulled his phone out, placed the call and was praying when he'd never been a praying man before. "All set. I'm sure you aren't going to let me pick you up, so I'll see you there at six tomorrow."

She nodded her head and laughed. "I'll bring an appetite with me and a lot of questions."

"I'll be ready," he said, watching her walk out.

He left Emma's office and saw Ryan standing there as if he'd been listening to the conversation. "Smooth move," Ryan said.

"What?"

"You better be ready to have your ass handed to you on a platter there," Ryan said, laughing. "Did you think of that? She looked feisty to me."

"She is. I've seen enough of it. But I owe it to her and her father. That was Nikki Brewster."

"I put that together myself," Ryan said, slapping him on the back. "And I have to ask, do you just want to apologize or maybe something else?"

"First step is apologizing, isn't it?" Colt asked.

Ryan grinned. "It sure is. You'll have to keep me posted. My days in the dating world are long gone."

Ryan had been one of the biggest playboys in the area before he married. "And you're thrilled for that. You've got a great wife and kids to go home to."

"I do. Kaitlin reminds me daily she is outnumbered, but if Nate ended up being a girl, I'd be outnumbered. Sometimes things work out for the best."

"There is always another child to even it out," Colt said.

"No. Even Kaitlin said she is probably done. Cameron and Harper are five and Nate is one. I'm not sure we are interested in adding to the clan." Ryan leaned down and whispered, "And I'm not sure I want another daughter. I already told Harper she can't date until she is thirty."

Colt laughed. "I hear she has you wrapped around her pinky."

"She does. Along with her mother and my sons." Ryan laughed. "Keep me posted. Can't wait to hear how this goes. And when you've got time, I've got a case I want to run by you."

"I'll be there in a minute," he said, glad that he might be ready to go out on his own. Now he just had to figure out how to get through dinner tomorrow and keep his skin intact.

CHANGE HER MIND

“I didn’t think you’d show up,” Colt said to Nikki when she got out of her car.

“I wasn’t sure I was going to be here either.” She’d gone back and forth in her head over why she was doing this. What she could possibly accomplish by agreeing to meet the man that was going to make her detest lawyers more than she did before.

The only thing she could think of was that she was curious what he thought he could say to her to get her to change her mind on anything.

“I’m glad you showed up. Hopefully you won’t throw a drink in my face and storm out during dinner.”

“Don’t bet on it,” she said, then walked past him when he opened the door. She’d felt kind of bad after picking this restaurant. He’d joked about her making him pay a lot for the dinner, so she threw the name out knowing how expensive it was.

Not because she’d been here before but because she’d heard others talking about it.

She was simple folk in her mind. A math teacher by day and a waitress or bartender by night.

She had student loans to pay, rent, and other expenses. Her father helped out when he could, but he’d been a single

father and though they never went without, they weren't rolling in it either.

Did she harbor some resentment that others had life easier than her? That they had a full family when hers was just a fraction of one?

Looking back through the eyes of an adult, she probably did.

All she could be thankful for was her dad still had the house she grew up in and it was paid for. He'd wanted to mortgage that as his down payment to get the pub and she'd managed to talk him out of it.

As much as she didn't want to live at home with him, if things got tight, she'd move back and help him out, but she didn't see that as a problem unless he couldn't sell the pub and get out from that massive mortgage. He had his pension and he was working part time too. His bills weren't much, so he would be fine once he could unload the pub.

"Baxter," Colt said to the hostess, and then they followed her to the back to be seated. It wasn't even ten seconds before a waitress came by and asked for their drink orders.

"What do you have on tap?" Nikki asked, then gave her order, Colt doing the same. "So, what is it you have to say to me?"

"Going in for the kill," he said. "Not even allowing me to get a sip of my beer first?"

"Fine. You can sip your beer when it comes, then you can tell me what it is you needed to say to me that you had to do it here. Once we are done talking, I can eat my meal in peace."

"It didn't have to be here," he said, grinning. "If you'd let me talk to you at the office we could have done it then."

"Don't be cute or I'll get up and leave now."

He sighed. "I told you that I wanted to apologize. That I'd like to talk to your father and apologize to him too."

"Why?" she said.

"Because that case didn't sit well with me. It never did. Your father's only fault was hiring someone that was vindictive."

"That was Sheryl. She always said how much she hated her ex. I'm not sure if he knew she was working and came in with his newest lady love on purpose or it was a happy coincidence."

"I don't believe in coincidences," he said.

"Me neither," she said, then picked up her drink the minute the waitress set it in front of her and took a healthy sip.

But how were they supposed to know that Sheryl would not only tear her nail off and put it in her ex's date's salad and another in his, but that she'd video herself doing it. When she put the salad down in front of the woman, she'd even held her hand on the plate longer than normal so that they could see it was her nail.

And of course she'd had her phone hidden under the tray and videoing the whole thing because she'd thought it'd be funny. That damn video should have been enough to clear her father. To show that it wasn't something in the kitchen that happened, but the video never even got released until after the trial and Nikki wondered why.

Nope, Sheryl had taken the order where no one would see her while she pulled her nails off and even snapped some pictures. She'd thought it'd be revenge and it was *just* a fingernail. It's not like it was any bodily fluid, per Sheryl's words.

It didn't matter. The woman threw a fit and Nikki had been there working, apologizing left and right. She knew right away it was Sheryl's nail, as she always had bright red manicured "claws." She suspected the ex-boyfriend knew that too.

What Sheryl thought was funny and payback for her ex cheating on her caused that woman to run Nikki's father's

pub through the mud and sue for mental distress or some other bull crap right along with the ex.

They didn't care about her father or the jobs that were lost. All they wanted to do was get back at Sheryl.

"Your father was caught in the middle of their vengeance for each other."

"Made worse by lawyers," she said.

His face flushed and he picked up his drink too. Before he could answer back, the waitress asked to take their orders. Nikki got a petite filet topped with sautéed shrimp. Yep, why not since she was getting all worked up again.

Colt laughed at her and ordered the same thing.

"As I told you before, someone else would have taken the case. I'm sorry for it. I told my firm I was against it, that it was a crock, but I couldn't do anything while I was working there."

"Other than walk away," she said.

"And again, someone else would have been handed it. I know you don't want to believe this, but as much as I hated it being dragged out, if I hadn't done that, they would have gone for more. They were getting frustrated and just wanted money at the end and the insurance company knew that. That's why their lawyers came out with a lowball settlement first and it was accepted."

"Two hundred thousand dollars is a lowball settlement?" she asked. "Guess I'm in the wrong line of work."

"I don't picture you the type to sue for anything even if it was legit."

"I don't know that I would. I can't say that for sure because sometimes I think my father should have done more a time or two in our lives and he didn't." She hadn't meant for that resentment to slip out and again wondered why at the oddest times she thought of her childhood.

"What does that mean?" he asked.

She wasn't sure she wanted to talk about this and regretted even bringing it up. "It doesn't matter."

He nodded his head. "How is your father now? How is the business doing? I hope it rebounded. You guys did the right thing talking to the press and admitting it was someone on the staff. The video had been leaked too afterward."

"It didn't matter at that point," she said. "The business was barely holding it together. I'm not sure how the video got out a few months ago or why it couldn't have been used to help us before. I didn't even know about the video until it was leaked. And it doesn't matter, but my father had to shut the doors last month."

"I'm truly sorry," he said slowly. "I had no idea. There is no way to open it back up?"

"I doubt it. The insurance premiums were killing him and while this was all going on, fewer people were coming in. Once that video got leaked things started to pick up, but it was too late. The damage was done. There were only so many times my father's friends could frequent the place and we appreciated it, but again, not enough."

"So, what is your father doing right now?" he asked.

She could see he looked upset, as he should. This was his fault, even if she'd been telling herself that Colt was right. If he weren't the lawyer then someone else would have been.

Did she want to believe what he said about it being a higher payout if he hadn't dragged his feet? She wasn't sure.

"He's a retired fireman. Not sure if you knew that," she said.

"I did."

"He's bartending at another pub. We've got the building and he's trying to sell it. It was his life savings. If he can unload the building, even if he has to break even, then it won't be debt over his head."

"I'm really sorry for that."

"I want to say you should be. I'm just so pissed off over it all. The health department shut him down for days. Coming

back from that was hard enough. But he fought and we ran specials and we worked hard. Then it was leaked to the press what happened. Then the lawsuit. It was one thing after another. But I've learned it seems that way in our life anyway."

"You're a teacher?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm sure you know all about us. Isn't that part of your job to figure it out? To see where you can hit us the hardest?"

"Yes, that is part of my job, but no, I don't know that much about you. This case wasn't big enough for that to happen. I know to you it seems it, but for the firm, this should have been a quick in and out."

She snorted. "That's sick. That you actually call it that."

"It is," he said. "Which is why I left. You can believe what you want about me, but if that was all I was about I would have fought harder. I would have come out guns a blazing early on and I would have squeezed the insurance company for a hell of a lot more. And then I would have stayed working there and done it to the next person."

"Why didn't you?"

"It's not what I thought I'd do when I went to law school. I figured I would have been on the other side telling people to shove these lawsuits up their ass."

"We could have used you on our side...if we could have afforded a lawyer to begin with."

"I know," he said. "I get it. Where I am now, they don't take cases like that. They are the lawyers fighting against that bullshit."

"And people have to pay a pretty penny for that too, don't they?"

"Unfortunately, yes. So do I get a chance to apologize to your father? Or do we just find other things to talk about so that we have an appetite left to eat?"

"I'm not sure how my father is going to feel about it. He's more forgiving than me, but I'll think about telling him."

"I can't ask for more than that," he said. "You teach high school math at Bethlehem?"

"I thought you didn't know much about me," she said.

"Just the basics. Your father and your careers, that it's the two of you. I don't know where your mother is other than she isn't in this area."

"Oh, she's in this area. She's in the Graceland Cemetery."

"I'm so sorry. I seem to be doing a lot of apologizing, but I had no idea."

"Why would you unless you wanted to go back to when I was a kid. I was five when she was killed overseas serving her country. Friendly fire they'd said. We never found out the truth and probably never will."

MAKE AMENDS

If this night could go from bad to worse, it just did without Colt even realizing that was possible.

Here he was thinking he could help the business out that might be suffering and get Nikki and her father back on their feet. It was the least he could do for his part in what happened, even if he was just doing his job.

But nope, instead he finds out the pub shut down not that long ago. He should have been paying more attention, but when the case was over he just wanted to put it behind him. And that had been his plan until Nikki's ticket came across his desk.

Sure, he'd thought about seeking them out after he'd started working for Ryan, but couldn't figure out a way to broach it.

This seemed like the opening he'd been waiting for.

And now was the time to see if he could make amends for his part.

As if that wasn't bad enough, he slipped and commented on her mother only to find out that she'd died in the line of duty.

"My brother Jake is an ex-Nightstalker in the Army. I've got a soft spot for anyone that serves."

"I do too," she said.

"I didn't think we'd have anything in common," he said. "Jake lost his best friend in an attack. It still haunts him to this day that he couldn't save him. It wasn't that long ago. Just a few years."

She looked up when the waitress returned with their meals. "I think I heard this on the news."

"I'm sure you did. Robby was a local too."

"I remember now. What is your brother doing?" she asked.

Seemed like she was willing to at least talk. "He's a medevac pilot for Albany Med." No use saying Jake was also a mystery writer. Nikki wouldn't care either way.

"So still serving in his way."

"Yeah. I'm going to assume when you made the comment about your father should have sued it had something to do with your mother?"

"I was a kid. I only know what others have said while I was growing up. My father would never do it. And it's not like he'd ever get answers. Even I know that now. We had to move on with our lives. And we were doing fine, just the two of us."

He was going to apologize again and didn't. He could only say it so many times and there wasn't anything he could do about the past.

"What made you want to be a teacher?" he asked instead.

She shrugged and cut into her steak, chewed and then swallowed before saying, "I didn't want to do anything dangerous and worry my father. He's been a fireman my whole life and it was hard when my mother was deployed and not home. She was only going to finish that last tour, she'd said. And I guess she did, just not the way we all thought. My father still talks about her and he always will. But then he worried that his job put him in danger too and he had me to think about."

"But he continued to do it," he said.

"It's his life. He only knew two things. Being a fireman and hanging out with his buddies for a drink. I know that probably sounds horrible, but it's not like he left me a lot to do it. He has a bar in the basement of our house. I had a lot of fathers in my life, but not many mothers."

"Meaning any man that dates you has to be prepared for a bunch of firemen to intimidate them?"

She laughed. "It's happened a time or two. Anyway, my father got this brainy idea to open his own place when I was in college. I didn't think he'd do it, but he did. I'm glad he got the loan on his own without putting the house up for collateral."

One more thing he'd feel guilty about if he found out they'd lost their house on top of this.

"So you've worked there all along to help out?"

"That's what family does. Helps. All through college since I just went to SUNY and then summers and some nights while I've been teaching. It was good money on the side. He wasn't making a killing, but he was paying the bills. Until he wasn't."

"I keep trying to change the subject and somehow it comes back around to what a dick I am," he said.

She laughed again. "If this were a date then I'd say you are striking out left and right."

He liked that she brought that up. "You should laugh more."

Her smile dropped. "I haven't had a lot to smile about in my life."

"Maybe it's time to change that."

"You sound like my father now. I've got enough of them, thank you very much."

"It's hard to have people tell you things when you think you know what is right. It's hard to start over too."

"Like you did?" she asked.

"Yes. I've got an older brother and a younger one and a younger sister. They all like to tell each other things. They

say I'm the argumentative one of the group though."

"I'm sure you are. I'm an only child. Some might say I've given my father fits, but I think I was normal."

"I've got a feeling you've given your father a lot of fits over the years."

"You've probably done the same with your parents. And since there is no reason to go back to things that tick me off when this meal tastes so good, tell me about your siblings."

"What do you want to know?" he asked, eating some more. He was eating slowly because he wanted to prolong the night as much as he could. She seemed to be easing away from her anger and softening a touch.

"Names, occupation. Single, married? I guess I hope you aren't married. Unless your wife doesn't care if you are out to dinner with another woman. Not that this is a date."

"You don't have to sound so offended over the possibility of a date with me. But the answer is no to being married. Grey is the oldest, and he's an orthopedic surgeon at Albany Med. His wife, Sierra, is a nurse and they just got married a few months ago. I already told you about Jake, and his wife is Rachel; she's a headhunter at Albany Med. Alexa is my baby sister. She's an elementary school teacher and got engaged over the summer to Colin who is an athletic director. That leaves me, alone and single."

"I'm sure you aren't alone as much as you want me to believe," she said.

"Trust me," he said. "I am. My job takes a lot of my time. Now that I've got a new one, it's even more so. I'm still getting the feel for this place, but I've known Ryan for years."

"Mathews is high end. Well known," she said. "I wouldn't have gone there if Emma didn't live in my apartment complex. And if we could have afforded any attorney when everything happened, we would have gone there."

"And here we are, back to what I'm trying to avoid talking about and making you drop your smile and good

nature."

She grinned. "Not many say I've got a good nature."

"I'm sure when you were working at your dad's you had it."

"I had to. It's part of the job. Just like teaching. Sometimes I'd love to scream at the kids and ask them what they could be thinking when they do and say things, and though they might hear me, they aren't listening. I need them to understand, and screaming isn't the way."

"A hard shell with a squishy center. If you allow a tiny break in the front you've got, then gooeyness seeps out."

She narrowed her eyes at him halfhearted. "You think you're so smart."

"Because I am," he said, grinning. "And you sound like me. Though I've been told I can talk the rust off of a sunken ship."

"That's funny. Must be a talent of yours."

"I've got plenty of them," he said.

"Are you flirting with me?" she asked, angling her head.

"Why would I do that when you can't stand me?" he asked back, a big smirk on his face. He had her there and she didn't know what to say.

It was probably a good thing or her mind would go to how sexy he looked in his button-down shirt and jeans. His brown hair slightly messy as if his fingers ran through it. His chocolate eyes roaming over her more than once and heating her up.

She finally pushed her plate back and said, "I'm stuffed."

"No dessert for you?"

"Nah. I had planned on it, but this was more than I normally eat. It was too good to stop though."

"It was good. Glad you suggested it."

She laughed at him again.

"So, when do I get to find out if your father will talk to me?"

"You know you could reach out to him yourself."

"I do. But I also saw how protective you were of him and figured I'd test it with you first. I get the feeling you're the one more upset by everything."

"I probably am," she said. "My father has worked hard his whole life. Having the pub wasn't going to be some easy retirement, but it was his dream. Shouldn't we all get our dreams?"

"Yeah, we should," he said.

And when the tab came back, Nikki reached into her purse to pull money out. "Here. I was only joking."

"No, you weren't," he said, not taking it. "You were pissed and had every reason to believe everything you thought. But I think I've gotten through to you somehow. You're still pissed off at the situation, but maybe not so much at me?"

"Maybe," she said. "But that doesn't change the fact that this wasn't a date and I'll pay for my own."

"No, you won't. Consider it combat pay for having to listen to me talk about things you'd rather forget."

"I insist, Colt."

"And I insist you aren't. You can leave that as a tip if you want, but I'm still putting the tip on my credit card."

He watched as he could tell she was torn but put the money back. "Thank you," she said.

"Did it hurt all that much to say that to me?"

"It actually did."

He laughed and walked her out and wondered if he'd ever hear from her again or if he'd have to reach out to Stan Brewster himself.

WORST NIGHTMARE

Are you going to let me know what is going on?" Nikki stopped pacing around her father's basement and looked over to see him standing behind his bar. It was where he always was, even if it was the two of them. He was almost more natural there than he was in his fire gear.

"What?"

"You're going to wear a hole into the carpet and I don't have the funds to replace it. You only pace when you've got an issue or something is on your mind. Is everything okay at school? No problems with your job?"

"It's all good. The first week was what it always is," she said. "I'm mainly teaching freshmen and sophomores. They either come in quiet and shy, hoping to not stand out, or loud and wanting attention. Nothing new there. They test the waters with me but don't get far."

Her father laughed. "You don't put up with too much bull. As long as they aren't hitting on you."

She rolled her eyes. Yep, she got a lot of comments over the years from students. Some to her face, others she wasn't meant to hear. That she was "hot for a teacher."

But they also learned fast she didn't take any crap. She could be friendly and nice and even joke and get along with

them, but she was strict and you learned in her class because she went out of her way to help.

That kid that needed a little extra that they weren't getting at home? She was staying late to give it to them.

The ones she saw that were hungry? She had snacks in her class nonstop for everyone. No reason to single someone out, but food wasn't just nourishment for the belly but also the brain.

Her job was to better these kids' lives and she was doing it the best way she could. Her father had taught her to give back and it was what she'd do in more ways than just education.

"No one is hitting on me. Even when they stay after school. Actually," she said, laughing, "one boy is almost protective of me now."

"Because you've got a soft spot for some. You took one under your wing again, didn't you?"

"Someone has to be there for these kids. His homelife sucks. I can see it on him even though he won't say much." Ian came in wearing the same clothes all last year, and often not clean though he tried to hide it. He was one whose stomach growled during the time he came in for help and would be embarrassed. He was trying and that was important.

"Are you feeding him?" her father asked.

"I feed a lot of kids. But yes, I've figured out his favorite granola bars and he comes in now and goes right for them, then we sit down and work on his homework. When he gets things right, I reward him with another. He thinks it's funny."

"But he doesn't turn them down, right? So you found a way to reach him and help him and let him keep his pride. Good on you. If it isn't school, then what?"

She sighed. No use putting this off now that they'd talked about her job. She'd been debating for a full week since she'd had dinner with Colt. She hadn't wanted to

believe a word he said, but what reason would he have for lying?

And she owed it to her father to say what Colt said to her. Even if she wanted to put it from her mind.

Just like she wanted to push the hot lawyer from her mind.

That might be another reason why she was pacing.

She would have had to be blind to not notice his good looks the first time she'd met him. She'd never forget that day either.

Here they'd been dreading the threat that Sheryl's ex had been making, but to get the notice of the lawsuit was their worst nightmare.

Her father had called Colt Baxter to talk. She'd tried to coach him through what to say and he'd shushed her. And when her father asked to meet, she wasn't letting him go alone.

They'd walked into that office, her preparing for a fight, even if her father had told her to back down. Colt had a suit and tie on. He was tall and thin. He was handsome and he wasn't smiling. She remembered that vividly.

Some lawyers were cocky. Colt was cocky, she knew it. But he never was with them. Which, looking back, was another reason that made her want to talk to her father about that dinner last week.

And through it all, she noticed that he was quiet but firm. Colt tried to advise them when maybe he shouldn't have. He suggested they get their own lawyer, but her father refused. It was money they didn't have and she hoped secretly that they'd win being the little guy.

It didn't happen. They lost.

They'd lost it all.

And then Colt comes out of nowhere and apologizes for his part in it.

Talk about a kick in the pants to wanting to detest someone on principle alone.

"Remember Colt Baxter?"

"Hard to forget about him," her father said, pouring himself a beer. Sunday football was playing and getting a beer in his hand was a sure sign he was going to come out from behind the bar and relax. "What about him?"

"I had dinner with him last Saturday?"

Her father lifted his eyebrow at her. "You went to dinner with the devil? Isn't that what you called him? Among several other interesting words?"

"I did," she said. "He's not really as much of one as I thought."

"Do I even want to know how this came about?"

Of course this meant she had to tell her father about her ticket, but since it was done and over with, it was fine. "I got a speeding ticket a few weeks ago."

"Nikki! How many times have I told you to slow down."

"It's not the time for a lecture. A girl that lives in the same apartment complex as me is a legal clerk at Mathews Law Firm. She said she could take care of it for me. It was cheaper to do that than get the points on my license. Anyway," she said, waving her hand, "a lawyer had to sign off on it and it happened to be Colt."

"He didn't work there," her father said. "If I could have afforded a lawyer to fight that crock of shit, I would have gone there."

"No, he didn't. He started there a month ago. Shortly after our suit ended."

"Interesting," her father said.

"What is so interesting about it?"

Her dad's big shoulders shrugged. "I don't know. I got the feeling he wasn't thrilled to be dealing with our case. He always acted like he was apologetic when he called me. He even told me once he was sorry to bother me on one call."

She wished she'd known that. Maybe she would have cut Colt some slack. Or maybe not. It'd been months of hell for

them. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Why would I? You couldn't stand him. I didn't think he was that bad of a guy. He was just doing his job."

She ground her teeth. She didn't need that thrown out at her either. Colt had said it to her and she knew deep down it was the truth. "A shitty job."

"Nikki," her father said, getting comfortable in his recliner. "I'm sure the families that rented from slumlords thought I had a shitty job when I had to put condemned signs on their homes and they ended up on the streets too. It's perception. There were many parts of my job I didn't like, but if I didn't do it someone else would."

"Colt said that too. That if he didn't have the case someone else would in the firm and they would have gone for a lot more."

"I believe that too."

"So you don't blame him?"

"Why would I? As I said, it was his job. But get back to this dinner. How did that come about?"

"He wanted to talk to me and I just wanted to get out of his presence."

Her father laughed. "I'm sure you had a few choice words to say about that too."

"I did. He suggested he take me to dinner and I could pick the place. I could consider it combat pay and make him break out his wallet."

"You didn't!"

"I was pissed enough. But by the end of the dinner I wanted to pay for my share and he wouldn't take it." Which made her feel childish too.

"So he wanted to go on a date with you?"

"He wanted to apologize to me and you. He'd like to apologize to you in person but had a feeling he'd have to go through me first."

"My little bulldog," he said. "Colt doesn't need to do that."

"Apologize or go through me?" she asked with her hands on her hips.

"Both."

"Well, he did. And I listened to what he had to say."

"And do you still hate him?" her father asked.

"I don't know what I think or feel," she admitted. She wanted to hate him but wasn't so immature that she'd say that. "He explained that he didn't want the case. He'd told his firm that and they didn't care. That it was the tipping point for him to end up leaving."

"He went to someplace completely different," her father said.

"Yeah. He pointed out that when he went to law school he saw himself being a champion of the underdog, not bringing them to the pound. My words, not his. The pound that is."

"I'm a little shocked you didn't come back at him saying that."

"I had to bite my tongue." She was trying. Most of her anger was gone by the end of the dinner and the confusion was starting to set in.

"And you don't believe what he had to say?" he asked.

"I didn't want to but then told myself he has no reason to lie. Looking back, a lot of things made sense too. Hearing you say some of it builds on that."

"You should just move on from it. I have."

"He'd like to apologize in person," she said. "We ended the date with me agreeing to bring it up to you and get back to him."

"Date?" her father asked.

"Dinner," she corrected. What was wrong with her?

"Sounds like maybe you wished it was a date?" he said, smirking at her.

"No. I can't stand lawyers to begin with and then knowing his personal hand in our lives. Never."

"Never say never. And as for apologizing in person, there is no need."

"Colt seems to feel there is one. I asked if it was so he could lay his head on the pillow at night."

"Being petty," her father told her.

"At the time I felt justified."

"And now you aren't sure?"

"As I said, I'm not sure what to think at this point." And that wasn't like her and she hated feeling that way.

"He knows my number if he wants to call me," her father said. "He did it enough."

"I'm sure it's with his old files. He's not at that place anymore. I doubt he remembers everyone he talks to."

"Most likely. Well, I'll leave it up to you."

"Why?" she asked, almost whining.

"Because I want to see what you decide."

She narrowed her eyes. "Not fair."

"Of course it is. Consider it a learning lesson."

"I outgrew learning lessons a long time ago," she said. Her father did this a lot when she was growing up. Made her make all her own decisions while he guided her. Sometimes she fell flat on her face, but he was there to pick her up. Other times she scored and he was next to her giving her a high five.

"You are never too old to learn a lesson. You'll do the right thing."

"This is about you," she said.

"No. It's about you and you know it. I made my peace. I think Colt knows that too. Why else reach out to you when he could have just come to me?"

MATTER OF FACT

I t'd been over a week since Colt had dinner with Nikki. After a few days he'd given up hope that she'd reach out to him. The best he could do was accept that he tried. He said what he could, and he had to move on.

So when he hung up the phone with her earlier this afternoon, he'd been stunned.

Not only did she call the office looking for him, but she also said that her father didn't need the apology; however, if he wanted to meet, they would be willing to.

He'd liked Stan Brewster when he met him. All the more reason that he had so much guilt on his shoulders over everything. The guy was a class act and was a victim more than anything else.

He was on his way to Stan's house now just outside of Albany, on the border of Guilderland. Not that far from his house, but he hadn't said that.

He parked in the driveway of the older brick ranch and got out. It was a decent neighborhood with a lot of established homes. It reminded him of Nikki's comment that thankfully they wouldn't lose their home with the business.

The front door opened before he could get to the first step and Nikki was standing there with her arms crossed.

So much for a welcoming smile.

"Still in your suit. I didn't realize this was an official visit."

"I didn't have a chance to go home and change. I came right from the office and this is on my way. Figured I'd just stop."

"You live around here?" she asked.

"Guilderland. Not that far."

"Nikki," her father said from behind her. "Move out of the doorway and stop being rude and let the man in."

He felt his lips start to smile over the words Stan said to his daughter, but when he caught her eyes narrowing at him, he thinned his lips out.

"Thanks for seeing me," he said to Stan. "I won't take up much of your time."

"Come on in. I told Nikki you didn't need to come. You didn't even need to apologize. You were just doing your job."

He caught the look between father and daughter and this time smiled. "I told her the same, but it doesn't mean I'm still not sorry for my part in you losing your business. I had no idea until Nikki told me."

"It happens," Stan said. "It just wasn't meant to be."

"I don't believe that," he said but wasn't ready to get into everything right yet.

"Maybe I'll try again another time. But for now, it is what it is. Do you have time for a beer? I'd offer you something to eat, but my daughter isn't cooking me dinner tonight like she normally does when she visits."

Colt laughed. "A beer would be great." He looked at Nikki. "You cook?"

"We took turns," she said. "When I was old enough to be home alone, I'd have dinner on the table when Dad got out of work. When he was home, he had dinner on the table for me."

"And when she was too young to be home alone, she spent a lot of time at her grandparents' house. I'm not sure what I would have done if they weren't there. I probably wouldn't have been able to remain a fireman, knowing the hours."

He was assuming that Stan knew Colt was aware it was just the two of them most of Nikki's life. "Family is good for that," Colt said.

"They are," Stan said. "It's just my mother left now, but she's in a retirement community. My father and my wife's parents are all gone."

He still called Nikki's mother his wife. That was saying a lot about the guy too.

"My father has a bar in the basement," Nikki said. "I can bring down some chips or peanuts. We always have them on hand."

"They are already down there," Stan said. "You know that. Don't hide up here."

He looked at Nikki and saw her frown at her father. "Fine," she said. "We can all go downstairs and have a beer while Colt apologizes."

"Nikki," Stan said firmly. "Don't be rude."

"It's fine, Stan," he said. "I wouldn't expect any differently."

"I raised her better. But she at least made the right decision in calling you."

"What?" Colt asked as he followed them through the house and down the stairs. On the way, he'd seen pictures of Stan and Nikki together through the years. Some handmade gifts that said "Best Dad Ever" on them sitting on shelves. Nikki might portray a hard shell, but the love for her father was front and center for all to see. Even though that tough shell he'd commented on was visible, he was positive there'd been breaks a time or two she'd tried to repair fast without witnesses.

"My father likes me to make decisions on my own. He left it in my hands to call you or not. It was the right thing to pass your message to him and then let you two talk even if I didn't need to be here tonight."

"Something tells me you wouldn't be anywhere else," he said to Nikki.

"You seem to peg my daughter well. What can I get you to drink?"

Stan opened up the fridge behind him and Colt said, "Any of those IPAs look good to me."

Nikki walked behind the bar and pulled out a jar of peanuts and put them in a bowl and set them on the counter as Colt took a seat on one of the stools. It might be the guy's basement but, damn, it felt homey and comfortable at the same time.

"Here's your nuts," she said, pushing the bowl by him.

He started to laugh and held back some sarcastic comment that would normally slip out around his brothers. "Thanks. You've got a nice setup here."

"I finished this basement years ago," Stan said. "A man needs his own space."

"You just wanted to hide from me," Nikki said, winking at her father. Yeah, she might be direct with strangers, but there were sentimental gestures there that she was reserving for those close to her.

"Those teenage years were hard," Stan said, putting his beer to his lips and smirking back at his daughter.

Colt took a healthy sip. "I've got a younger sister. I might not have been home much during her teenage years, but it was enough."

"How much younger?" Stan said.

"Almost ten years. She was the oops. Or so my brothers and I told her enough."

"That's not nice," Nikki said. "Colt has an older brother and a younger brother too."

"I thought Nikki would have a few siblings herself, but life has a way of not panning out the way you thought."

It wasn't said for pity, just matter of fact. But Colt was going to do what he came here for. "I know that. And I'm sorry for the part I played in you losing your business."

"Just doing your job," Stan said. "I told Nikki that. If it wasn't you, it'd be someone else. Not many people looked at me favorably when I had to condemn a house as a fireman. It happens. Life isn't always fair."

"No," he said. "It's not. But I'd like to right a wrong if I can."

He pulled the check out of his pocket, put it on the bar and pushed it toward Stan. "Holy shit. What is that for?" Stan asked.

"That was my cut of your settlement. I don't want it."

"Damn," Nikki said. "You got that for what you called a lowball settlement?"

"It's common practice for a firm to get about thirty-three percent of a settlement out of court. The firm takes their cut and that was mine. I was hoping that it would have helped your business, but when Nikki said you closed it down, I'm not sure if that is enough to get you going again."

"I can't take this," Stan said. "That's payment for your job. It's like your paycheck."

Colt laughed. He didn't want to sound conceited. "It's not much, all things considered."

"Meaning that this is a drop in the bucket for you to get paid?" Nikki said.

"Now you're being rude," Stan said. "That isn't your concern. Colt, I appreciate it, but I can't take this."

"Would it be enough to get the business up and running again?"

He could see Stan hesitate, but Nikki answered, "Dad. You know it would." There was hope in Nikki's eyes. Just a flicker of it, but he caught it before she could extinguish it

from his sight. That was his goal and he was glad to know he hit it.

"Nikki is right, but it doesn't feel right to do that. Besides, I can't do anything about the bad press. You can't escape that."

"Then open it under a new name and rebrand it," he said.

"I appreciate the thought," Stan said. "But I can't take this."

He wasn't going to take no for an answer. "How about a no interest loan?"

"I don't like owing anyone anything," Stan said.

"Dad," Nikki said. "This is your dream. You know it."

"Listen to your daughter," Colt said. "She seems to know you so well."

"Oh, now you're going to side with her. But I can't," Stan said, pushing the check back.

"Are you looking for a silent partner?" Colt asked. "You wouldn't have to pay me back. Consider what the business is worth, then what percentage would this be?"

He watched the two of them staring each other down. Nikki was ready to jump on it, Stan wasn't so positive.

"I'm not sure I've got what it takes to do it this soon."

"Bull crap, Dad," Nikki said. "You're bartending at someone else's pub when you want to do it at yours. Think of the people you laid off that you could call back. Maybe just do fewer hours to start."

"Do you need more money?" Colt said.

"No," Stan said.

"If you are considering a silent partner, I'll square it up so I can come in at an even amount. I don't even want to guess at numbers."

"This is more than absolving any guilt," Stan said.

He knew it was. His parents would think he was nuts if he told them what he was doing too. "Maybe I'm looking for an investment? I can get some of the crowd in there. I've

got a big family and a lot of reach. Did I mention my brother Jake is married to Rachel Chapman, of Chapman Construction?"

"You didn't tell me that," Nikki said.

"It wasn't relevant before. But those construction guys love a good beer."

"You're trying to sweeten the deal and I appreciate it."

Colt picked the beer up and put it to his lips. "Don't give me an answer today. Take some time to think it over."

He knew darn well Nikki would be able to convince her father to do it.

And then this would be his way to spend more time with her and maybe get her to not dislike him so much.

STARTING OVER

“I can’t believe you are doing this,” Jake said to him two weeks later.

“Well, I am,” Colt told his younger brother over a beer on his deck. Grey was sitting there too just watching the show.

“Is this a midlife crisis?” Grey asked. “A longing to own a bar?”

“No,” he said. “It just came to me.”

“Nothing just comes to you,” Jake said. “So spill it. What is this about?”

“Remember that case I had a few months ago? The one with the fingernail in the salad?”

Jake started to laugh. “Yeah. That one really got to you. Of course I never thought I’d see the day you were trying cases like that.”

“Lifelong dream of mine,” he said sarcastically.

“Okay, so this is the case that made you leave, isn’t it?” Jake asked. Grey was still watching as he drank his beer.

“Yeah. I’d had enough. It’s not what I signed up for. What I wanted. And having shit like that over my head to get my partnership made it worse.”

“So you were told you had no choice and had to take it?” Jake asked.

"I was told the way to a partnership is to bring in money and they didn't give a shit if it cost some hardworking man his life savings and retirement dream."

"I saw that in the paper," Grey said. "Stan Brewster. It was his second career after retiring from the fire department a few years ago."

"Yeah. Guy busted his ass putting his life on the line for others and has the rotten luck of some petty shit like that to happen in his bar."

"Wasn't there a video released on social media a month or so ago? The employee of his had done it as a joke, right? Nothing happened to her?" Jake asked.

"No clue if anything happened to Sheryl. All this guy and his new girl wanted was a fast settlement. Because it wasn't as fast as they wanted, by the time the insurance company came in, they took the first offer. Not as much as they could have gotten, but Janet, my boss, wanted it over with too."

"Had she still been hitting on you?" Grey asked.

"Not as often. I think she got the hint."

"Which is probably why she saddled you with that case," Jake said.

"Most likely. It doesn't matter. If those are the type of cases they want in their firm now, it's not for me. If I don't get my partnership at Mathews, then I don't. At least I know I'm making a difference at Ryan's firm."

"Sometimes you've got to step back to move forward," Jake said.

"It is what it is. I'm much happier now. I'm even venturing into new investments. I figured I might as well take my cut from that case and put it to something good."

Grey started to laugh. "You gave it to the Brewsters, didn't you?"

"I didn't *give* it to them."

"But you wanted to and they probably wouldn't take it?" Jake asked

"No," he said. "They wouldn't. Not even as a no interest loan. I apologized for my part in what happened. They had to close down the pub. They were on thin ice after it all happened and then couldn't hold it together. Not even when the video came out. Many supported Stan and Nikki, but not enough."

"Nikki, huh?" Grey asked.

Leave it to Grey to zero in on that. "Stan's daughter. She's a teacher, but she worked the bar with her father. She is the one that talked Stan into starting over."

"And the light dawns," Jake said. "You did this to get in a woman's pants."

"Asshole," he said to his younger brother. "Do you think I'd put down that much money to get in a woman's pants?"

"Who knows? It depends how hot she is," Jake said.

"Hot," he said.

"Did you really do it for that?" Grey asked.

"Do you think I would? Looking at her is a nice side benefit. But no. This case never sat well with me and you knew it. It was one of many and I was over it. It felt like blood money. I thought I'd give it to the bar. Leave it in a tip or something. But nope. When I saw Nikki at the office a few weeks ago, she gave me a bunch of shit and said they closed the doors."

"And you would have hated that you wanted to do the right thing and she wouldn't let you," Grey said. "So what? Now you own part of this business?"

"It looks it," he said. "Ten percent. I finished up the paperwork last week. They were worried about the bad press still, but I suggested they change the name and maybe paint or something. Change it up inside. Not sure. It sounds like they agreed to it since it's called Nikki's and not Brewster's."

"All the more reason you will want to have a part in it. I need to meet this woman," Jake said.

"She'll give you a run for your money, Jake. She is a no bull lady. Maybe a little stubborn with it and over the top."

"And we know how much you love to argue with people," Grey said. "Sounds like a loud relationship."

"Who said anything about a relationship?" Colt asked. Sure, he'd like to have something with Nikki but knew when to push and when to sit back. Sitting back wasn't going to be an option but pushing couldn't be either. At least not as much as he would have hoped for.

"So, what is your next step then?" Jake asked.

"I don't know."

"Which is driving you nuts," Grey said. "I can see it on your face. You hate not getting what you want."

"I'm not sure what I want right now."

"It seems to me you do but don't want to admit it," Jake said.

"I plead the fifth."

"Spoken like a true lawyer," Jake said, laughing.

"Nikki happens to hate lawyers," he said.

"Lawyers or just you?"

"I think both," he admitted. Then he decided to tell his brothers the rest. "Her mother was killed during friendly fire in the Army when she was a young girl. I think they never got the truth of what happened."

Jake snorted. "I know that feeling. I'm sure they saw and heard their fill of legal crap during that time. Sounds like they've had a lot of hard knocks in life."

"Yeah," he said. "It's time for them to have something good happen. So when the place is open and running in two weeks, spread the word if you can. You didn't hear it from me though. Remember, I'm a silent partner."

"I'll make sure Reed knows and his crew." Reed Chapman was Jake's brother-in-law. That would go a long way to getting some of Chapman Construction there.

"Sierra and I will stop in one night. Maybe I'll see if Jack and Cori want a night out."

"I'll mention it to Ryan. If we are lucky we can get some groups in there, spreading the word, and hitting social media up too."

"You're determined to make them succeed, aren't you?"

"The underdog," he told his brothers. "You know how I operate."

RUNNING HIS MOUTH

The next day, Nikki was in jeans and an old shirt, her hair out of her face with a bandana around it. There were several cans of paint on the floor and she was ready to give the bar a facelift.

She'd always hated the dark colors her father had in here, but it was his bar and reflected his style. Since he named this one after her, she was insistent that it was going to reflect her style.

Bright with touches of bold. There wouldn't be a theme, but it'd be welcoming.

Not so welcoming that she was thrilled Colt would be showing up to help paint though.

He'd said silent partner, yet he was going to be here soon to help them get the place ready to open in *less* than two weeks if she had anything to say about it.

Colt had drawn up the papers making him a small owner, her father having the rest. Her father had wanted to put some of it in her name, but she'd said no. It was his. She knew it'd come to her at some point...if it survived.

Part of her wanted it so badly for her father. But it wasn't her life and it never would be. She did what she did for her father and her father only.

"Are you going to start before Colt gets here?"

"Yes," she said. "No one said he had to help out. That isn't being silent. You know darn well he'll be yapping while he is here."

"Don't be such a hard ass, Nikki. Some days you are so like your mother."

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said, lifting her chin up, but she had a feeling it wasn't meant to be one.

She was irked the hot lawyer would be in her presence again. She wanted to dislike the guy, but it was getting hard to keep that stance the more she was around him.

"It can be one. Or it can be an insult. I know you don't remember much about your mother, but she could form an opinion and then there was no changing that."

"First opinions happen to normally be the correct ones."

"Not in this case and you know it. Though I've got to say that I liked Colt when I first met him."

"How could you like the guy that was helping to bring us down?"

"He wasn't helping them. I believe deep down he was helping us in his way. Or the only way that he could. I believed what he said that by dragging it out it actually helped us."

"But it could have gone the other way. They could have gotten pissed and pushed for more."

"You're right, they could have, but they didn't. In the beginning they upped their amount twice."

"I didn't know that," she said. Why didn't her father tell her?

"You didn't need that stress or headache. The amount you were given was the second amount. It started out smaller at fifty thousand. I think they thought I'd just pay it out myself. Not sure why they thought I had it."

"Who knows what goes through anyone's mind."

"When I didn't respond to that, they jumped it to a hundred thousand. I told them no. When they retained a

lawyer it jumped to five hundred thousand for emotional distress or some other bullshit.”

“How come we can’t sue for the same thing?” she asked.

“It’s not who I am. I could have probably done a countersuit on Sheryl, but why? She doesn’t have anything and why ruin her life?”

“Because her idiotic move ruined ours? Jealousy always gets people in the end.”

“It does,” her father said. “Just remember that.”

“It’s hard to forget.” Her father had said that to her enough in life when she was watching from the sidelines.

Maybe he knew she was wishing for things she didn’t have, but she’d never voiced those words.

She picked one can up and shook it, then opened the lid and grabbed a brush.

“Aren’t you going to tape around the molding first?”

“No need to. It will slow me down. I can handle it just fine. I’ve got a steady hand.”

“And no one will notice any mistakes up at the top?” her father asked, laughing at her.

“That too.”

Twenty minutes later, she turned when the door opened. She figured it had to be Colt, but she wasn’t expecting to have that much of a reaction to him in jeans and a T-shirt that fit him much better than she’d thought.

He had some nice biceps on him that came out of nowhere.

“I’m ready, willing, and able to be put to work. Where do you want me?” he asked.

He was much too cheerful for her and her confusing thoughts. “We are just painting right now.”

“No tape around the molding? Or don’t you trust me to do that?”

She heard her father laugh. “Can I trust you to not make a mess?”

"I redid my basement almost two years ago. Did most of the work myself."

"Painting?" she asked.

"I put new floors in. Hardwood. I had a crew come in and frame a bathroom and a plumber and electrician do the heavy stuff. I did all the cosmetic. Tiles, paint, cabinets and lights. Those things aren't hard."

"Is there anything you can't do?" she asked when he picked up a brush. He could have gone to the other end of the room but instead stayed on her side and stood on a table like her. She'd kept her eye on him and noticed that he was moving fast and straight. Guess he did know what he was doing.

"There is a lot I can't do," he said. "Starting with finding a way to get on your good side."

Her father laughed again. He was behind the bar cleaning the dust off the bottles that he'd brought back. He'd been reluctant to take Colt's money and move ahead with this, but she was all over it.

She had no clue how much money Colt had, but the check he'd put on her father's bar a few weeks ago was more than she'd ever seen at once. She was thrilled to see more than five thousand in her savings, but multiple times? That wasn't something she figured she'd have for many years to come.

And Colt added some more to it so that he could have ten percent of the bar. She had no idea why he wanted to do that. It's not like he was going to make that much. Or maybe he figured he'd get it back if it failed and they sold the bar.

He would because her father made sure it said that in the contract. That Colt would get back his initial investment regardless.

She didn't like that her father did that. But he'd only told her to put a cork in it. That it was his bar and his decision.

And since she talked him into this, the least he could do was to make sure Colt got his money returned to him.

She knew her father didn't like to ask anyone for help nor did he want to be indebted to anyone.

Her father called her stubborn, but he was more so whether he wanted to admit it or not.

"Why do you care if I'm on your good side or you're on mine?" she asked.

"I just figured it'd be a better working environment."

"But you aren't working here. You're a silent partner. Or don't you know how to be silent?" she asked, smirking.

He looked over and grinned at her. "Do you know of any lawyer that can be quiet?"

"I told my father that," she said.

"She did," her father agreed. "And since you are here working, the least I can do is give you a beer. So I'm thinking of opening Wednesday through Sunday night. Opening at eleven, get some lunch crowd in and then shutting down around nine on Wednesday and Thursday and Sunday. Staying open to midnight Friday and Saturday."

"You know what works best," Colt told her father. "I'm just along for the ride, but I'll do my best to get the crowd in here and spread the word."

"So that is what your part of the silent partnership is going to be?" she asked.

"I'd like it to be more than the cash man. I'm glad I got you going but hoped to see it continue."

"So would we," Stan said. "I've started to get the word out that Nikki's was opening. That we were back and better than ever with a facelift."

"Thanks, Dad. Now everyone is going to think I got the facelift."

"I doubt anyone will think that," Colt said.

"We should start the staff slow," she said, ignoring Colt. "I'll work every night and the weekend for the first few

weeks until we see how things are going. Michele is willing to take whatever hours we give her."

"So you've already talked to the staff even though you said you weren't going to get involved with running things?"

"I know Michele and I made the schedules. All I did was reach out to see if she was interested in coming back and she was."

"I've got Scott and Logan back in the kitchen too. They were glad I called, as neither had been able to find another job. If I can keep the employees staffed and the bills paid for a year, that is good enough for me."

"Maybe we can try to make it better than just good enough," Colt said. "Come back with a vengeance."

Her father laughed. "I like your vote of confidence. I'll figure out some specials to run and then post on social media. You set everything up, Nikki? I'm not very good with all of that."

"It's up and running. I've got plans to post pictures of every step we take. Get those specials and I'll make up some fliers and post them places around town too."

"Get me some too," Colt said. "I'll make sure they make the rounds."

"Is that what you're good at?"

"What's that?" he asked.

"Making the rounds?"

"I don't know that I've ever been told that before."

"Nikki," her father said. "Do I need to lecture you?"

Colt laughed. "I don't think Colt was insulted. Were you, Colt?" she asked.

"Hardly. I'm just curious why you care if I do? Unless you are asking for a more personal reason?"

She opened her mouth and then shut it, knowing the blush filled her face.

HIDDEN AGENDA

Colt wanted to pat himself on the back for getting to the point where Nikki couldn't come back with a response.

He was a good lawyer for a reason. He knew when to talk and when to shut up, when to drive his point home.

And he drove it home and knew now was the time to move on. "So, what types of food do you normally serve here?" he asked Stan, almost ignoring Nikki now. He had a feeling she wouldn't like that either.

"The basics. Burgers, club sandwiches, fish and chips, wings, salads. Nothing too out of the box. Pub food."

"Good food," Nikki said. "We've gotten a lot of good reviews on the food. That's never been an issue."

"Great to know," he said. "I can't wait to get my first meal here."

"It's on the house," Stan said.

"No," Nikki said. "Make him pay like the rest of us."

Stan laughed. "You've never paid for a meal and you know it."

He turned to look at the grin on her face. "I will though... maybe," she said.

"If you're waiting on me, I'll tip real good. If you give me a smile," Colt said.

Stan laughed. "Are you two going to go at it like this all the time? Guess now I know how it would have been if Nikki had a sibling."

He didn't think of Nikki as a sibling and didn't want to. Not that he could say that to either of them and had to figure out where or how this could go any further.

Right now, he needed to get on her good side and stay there. To get her to trust him and not think he was this horrible person that caused the end to her father's dreams.

And by the end of the day, the inside of the bar was painted a nice light gray. Simple enough, but it did look bright and clean.

"I'm going to put some of my decorations back up again," Stan said.

"They won't go with the gray," Nikki argued.

"You just don't like my antlers."

Colt watched the two of them eying each other and assumed this was normal for them. It was almost like he and his brothers at times. Not so much with Alexa though, as he was so much older that he never got close to her until later in life.

"There are a lot of things I didn't like in here."

"It might have your name on the outside, but the deed is in mine and Colt's name. What do you think, Colt?" Stan asked, as he reached behind the bar and pulled out a pair of antlers.

"No comment," he said.

"Smart man," Nikki said.

"I've been caught in the middle of a lot of these disagreements in my house growing up. I've had my fill of them in my lifetime."

"A man needs a beer when that happens," Stan said.

"You say that about everything in life," Nikki said, laughing and moving to lay her head against her father's arm in an innocent move. Yep a tiny break in that shell when she could relax. Bonus points he was actually

witnessing what he'd assumed. "A beer doesn't solve all the world's problems."

"For a bartender it does," Stan said. "That's how I make my tips."

Colt laughed and pulled his wallet out, then put a five down. "A tip for the advice then."

"I'm putting this on the wall. First money for Nikki's."

"It's a tip not a sale," Nikki said.

"Same thing in my eyes. And it came from my silent partner. Even better."

"You mean the guy that hasn't been that silent today," Nikki said. Her eyes were sparkling with those words.

"You didn't expect me to be, did you?" he asked, putting the beer to his lips.

She didn't answer him again and he was fine with that. He liked the fact they were at least able to carry on some conversations without her scowling or using the words "hate" or "detest" with him.

When his beer was done, he looked at his watch and noticed that it was close to five. "How about I order us a pizza? We've been here all day."

"We can't have a pizza delivered here," Nikki said. "That wouldn't look right when you'd think we'd just cook our own food."

"I'll go pick it up," he offered without rolling his eyes like he wanted to.

And thirty minutes later he was walking back in carrying a large pepperoni pizza and a dozen of wings. "Two meals with you, Nikki. I wasn't sure I was even going to get the one."

"Now you're getting cocky," Nikki said. "Just like all lawyers."

"Since you're grinning, I won't be insulted. A lawyer can be cocky and not be a dick. At least I try not to be."

He stared at her to see if she'd respond and when Stan cleared his throat, she finally said, "Fine. You were never a

dick."

"Watch your mouth," Stan said to his daughter.

"I'm using the same word he did. But it's true. I didn't want to believe it, but I think you probably lessened things like you'd said. It's over with and I can tell you, I'm going to be very careful who we hire here again. If someone is a petty person they are getting canned."

"There are laws on why you can and can't fire someone," he said.

"Don't get all lawyerly on me. I know New York is an at will state. I can let someone go because I don't like the color of their shirt that day. I just can't fight their unemployment."

"Just wanted to make sure you were aware of that. Consider it as you've got free legal advice since I'm a silent partner."

"That's good to know," Stan said.

"Hopefully that advice won't get put to use. Especially if people know you own some of Nikki's."

"I didn't think you were going to make it known," he said. "Other than word of mouth."

"I'm not. That was what you wanted. How many people have you told?"

"Just my family. I'm close with them. They've got a long reach and will spread the word and get in here to check it out on top of it. When you're ready to open the doors in a few weeks, I'll be ready to do my part."



"Do you have a better feeling about it now?"

Nikki looked at her father when he was cleaning up the bar after Colt left. They'd eaten the pizza and wings and she had a beer herself while Colt finished the single one he had, then switched over to soda.

They didn't talk about the bar anymore other than him showing excitement over it. She was slightly stunned over that.

"I guess," she said. "I don't feel like there is a hidden agenda like before."

"I'm not sure I ever felt that way. Not about this. He had one when he wanted that first meal with you, but it was to apologize," her father said.

"I feel like we came to terms of sorts. I doubt we will see much of him."

"Never know," her father said.

"He's got a demanding career and a life outside of work, I'm sure. He isn't going to be someone to come sit in the bar at night and hang out."

"Probably not. But it's not that far from him if he lives in Guilderland, like he said. He might stop in to eat for dinner a time or two."

"He may," she agreed. "So we are opening in two weeks?"

"I was thinking earlier if I can get everything stocked."

She smiled. "Colt said two weeks. Are you going to tell him it's sooner?"

"I will when the time comes. I don't think he is going to care one way or another. I gave notice where I'm working now and I'm itching to get back at it. The staff is ready to start too. I can put some good time in this week and Scott and Logan are ready to set up. We need to work on the menu and order the food. That won't take long, as I've still got my accounts. I need to have menus printed and get the word out. I know all my buddies from the firehouse are ready to give their support when the doors open."

"Fine," she said. "Give me everything you've got when you're ready and I'll get to work on social media. I'll start teasing with pictures this week."

"Pictures of what?" her father asked.

"Of the changes inside. Maybe we could have a few different menu items too. That way they know it's just not an atmosphere change or a name."

"Good idea. I'll leave it to the kitchen to do that. So we are good here?"

"Of course we are," she said. "I'm the one who wanted you to do this. You didn't."

"I always wanted to do it, but I don't like taking handouts."

"This wasn't a handout and you know it."

"You can call it whatever you want. I know you are giving Colt shit about not being silent, but he needs to do what makes him feel like he is contributing."

"But he doesn't want to."

"I think you're wrong."

THE MORAL LINE

Five days later Nikki was letting Colt into the pub. It was only the two of them as her father was working his last shift at his other job.

"This looks great," Colt said. "You two have gotten a lot of work done in a short period of time."

"My father was itching to open earlier. I know he said two weeks and it's only six days. Hope that isn't an issue."

It was hard for her to say that, but her father reminded her that Colt *did* own some of the pub named after her.

"As he should be. You said this was his dream. Aren't we all allowed to have dreams?"

She angled her head. "So, what is your dream then if we should all have one?"

He laughed. "I'm not sure I've got one yet."

"A champion of the underdog. Isn't that what you wanted to do?"

"And I am now. Or trying to at Mathews. I'd like to think I was just on a detour. It wasn't all that horrible when I started."

"I can't imagine your job being horrible with paychecks like that."

This time he tilted his head. "Money isn't everything. Especially when it crosses the moral line in my eyes. You

made a comment about me laying my head on the pillow and it was hard at times.”

“Then why not leave before now?”

He shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“If you say so,” she said, moving around and flipping more lights. “Here’s the kitchen.”

“Looks nice and organized in here. I’m not much of a cook so as long as the food comes out on time and is good, that is all I care about. That and passing inspections.”

“We’ve never had any problems before. That is what made this whole thing so hard. My father was a code enforcer on top of it. And though it had nothing to do with food regulations, he knows what is allowed and not for most things.”

“You guys had horrible luck for what happened. Most people can bounce right back from it.”

“We couldn’t.”

“Why?” he asked. “I don’t want to ask your father and insult him, but I know you’ll give me the truth. And I know you asked me here because you want to make sure that I leave the running of the place to him. Don’t worry about it. I’m only saying or doing what I am to make him feel better.”

“What?” she asked. “What does that mean?”

“It means your father might think it was a handout even if I own a small part of it. If I give a tiny bit of input or ask questions, he’ll feel like maybe I’m contributing when I’m really doing it so he doesn’t feel bad.”

Damn it. He was probably right. Her father would feel that way. Not only that, her father thought Colt was doing it to make himself feel better, but she was more inclined to agree with Colt on this. It was really hard to stay mad at this guy.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I have a feeling that was hard for you to say just now.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. Or maybe not so hard when they butted heads and challenged each other at every

other word. "It's hard for me to say when I'm wrong or that I'm sorry."

"I'm sure. But this was just thanking me. Why is that so hard? And what were you thanking me for?"

Her shoulders dropped. "We've been on our own for so long. Sure, the guys at the firehouse have always been there for my father and always would be. He's got a brotherhood there. But he's always put me first and never dated again. I don't know why. Not really."

"I'm sure it's because he loved your mother and then was heartbroken over losing her. Not only that, he had a daughter to raise afterward. My guess is he never wanted you to feel like he wasn't giving you all his attention."

She started to laugh. "That might be true, but my father didn't always dote on me. I think I told you before that he let me make my own decisions, hoping I'd make the right ones. I didn't always and when I didn't he was there to catch me when I fell, but to also point out what an idiot I might have been."

He smiled all soft and her heart started to race. "I could see him doing that. But I'm thinking you didn't fall all that much."

"Please," she said. "I had a lot of scraped knees and elbows growing up. I'm loud and think I'm always right. Normally because I am." She winked with that last statement.

"Except with me."

She just shrugged again, not willing to let him know he might be right. "My point is that he didn't dote on me. He gave me a lot of freedom. He said I was so much like my mother that he treated me the same at times."

"Do you think maybe he didn't like that she wasn't home?"

"We are getting a little personal here. Why is that?" she asked. "And don't say it has to do with wanting to know your business partner more."

"Just conversation," he said. "If I crossed the line, then tell me. As you know, I like to talk. Questions are part of that."

"I don't know much about my parents' marriage. I was only five when she died. What I remembered was my father opening the door and seeing people in suits standing there and him saying 'No. Don't tell me. I don't want to hear it.'"

"I'm sorry. That isn't a great memory to have."

"I don't remember much about my mother. That is my biggest regret about things."

"You were five."

"And even then she wasn't around much. But hearing I'm a lot like her kind of makes me feel good on one hand and not so good on another."

"Why not so good?"

"Because it tends to be in a negative light." She shook her head. "I shouldn't have said that."

He hesitated a minute and asked, "So why teaching?"

"You are really getting personal tonight."

"Conversation again. You know why I wanted to be a lawyer."

"Helping the underdog that you didn't do for a long time and now you are."

"I never said I didn't do it for a long time. I did more in the beginning. But in the past few years it was like the partners—or the one I was reporting to—had other plans for me."

It was the way he said it that had her asking, "What kind of plans?"

"Does it matter? I'm not there anymore and now you are evading. Why teaching? Or is that too personal?"

"Not personal. I couldn't do anything dangerous. I wouldn't do that my father."

"I'm sure if you wanted to he would have supported you."

"He would have, but I don't have it in me. I might be like my mother, but I don't have the desire to put my life at risk all the time."

"My sister Alexa would say teachers put their lives at risk all the time. Kids in need, family disputes, violence in the classroom."

"She's elementary, right?"

"She is. You're high school. A whole different ball of wax."

"Extremely," she said. "And yes, it happens. One too many kids where you look at them and see something isn't right at home. I do what I can by trying to relate to them through schoolwork if possible. If not, then I try to get through to them other ways."

"Because you serve just like your mother and your father, just in your own way."

"You're right," she said.

"Wow. You just said I was right and a hole didn't open up in the floor and drop you down to hell."

She burst out laughing. "Damn. Imagine that."

"I've seen everything I needed to in here," he said. They'd been moving around flipping lights on and talking. "Unless you needed to show me something else?"

"I'm good," she said. "I'm starving so I'm ready to go home and eat. Tomorrow I'll be here right after work and won't stop until we close."

"Why don't we get some dinner?" he asked.

"Three times now? I didn't say that for you to offer."

"I know you didn't. But if you don't have any other plans, why not? I just want to go home and change first."

"No plans," she said, her gaze roaming over him in his suit. He was a treat on the eyes with his brown hair and dark eyes. He was looking high end and fashionable, but she liked him better in jeans and a fitted T-shirt the other day. Not that she'd ever tell him that.

"Do you want to meet somewhere, or follow me to my house? There is a great Italian place not far from me if you want to check it out."

"Italian sounds good."

She was already in jeans herself since she got out of work earlier and was running around to get the last of the things needed for her father to open tomorrow. She hated that she wasn't going to be here for the opening at lunch, but she was teaching. Michele would be and could hold down the fort. She didn't expect it to be too busy anyway right away.

"Then I'll wait till you lock up and you can follow me home."

She nodded and shut off all the lights, then walked out behind him, her eyes going to his ass. She couldn't see much with the suit on but was looking forward to seeing him in jeans again.

INFERIOR

Colt wanted to pat himself on the back for playing this the way he was.

He had no clue that Nikki would agree to dinner with him, nor did he think she'd go to his house either.

It didn't matter to him, but if she felt comfortable enough to do that, then maybe she was warming up to him in more ways than one.

It was a short drive to his place, her car following behind his.

When he pulled into the garage, she parked and got out behind him. "I figured you for a new development with a lot of big modern homes. Not a colonial."

"That would be my brother Grey. He lives in Paradise Place."

She snorted. "Yep, I guess I figured you'd be there."

"There are older homes in there too. Many like mine."

He walked into the mudroom. "Shoes on or off?" she asked.

"You can keep them on. I'm not that much of a neat freak."

She followed him through to the kitchen. "This looks newer than what the house is."

He noticed she always commented on things. Some might say it was tacky, but he just found her open. Honest. Outspoken. He supposed it was the way she was and some might find it rude, but he was fine with it.

"I've been here about five years. All the work was done in the kitchen and baths, which was fine with me. The one downstairs is the only new bath, bringing it to three full and one half."

"You said you were handy, so what did you do here?"

"Hardwood floors. There was carpeting down here and I'm not a fan. So I put the floors in."

"Nice. I like the dark wood with the white molding and the lighter kitchen. So many do white and gray now."

"As I said, it was done when I moved in. I don't mind the tan granite. The white backsplash breaks it up from being too close to the cabinets. I thought about painting the cabinets but couldn't decide on a color that would look right. White wouldn't and I'm not into colored cabinets. The oak is fine."

"It's still modern because of the style."

"That was my thought. Islands are desirable, but I'm okay with the L shape instead. Three stools on the side. It's where I eat most of my meals."

"But you've got a table right next to it."

"How many men do you know that sit at a table by themselves unless it's the only place to sit?" he asked, laughing.

"Not many. But most of the men I know eat on the couch."

"I've been known to do that too and it drives my mother nuts."

"Are you a Momma's boy?"

This time he couldn't control the laughter. "No. I think if anyone, my brother Jake was the closest to my mother as the youngest boy. But Alexa was the one closest to my mom,

as she always wanted a little girl. Alexa is a Daddy's girl too."

He never was jealous of it. Nor did he ever feel like his parents favored one sibling over the other. Not until Alexa, but by then he and Grey were in college when they might have noticed it.

"Many would say I was a Daddy's girl, but I don't see it. I just see it was only the two of us."

"You carry that around a lot," he said. "Do you think that is another reason that your father never dated anyone else?"

"Talk about personal," she said.

He knew he was pushing his luck, but at times he wanted to see how far he could go. "Just making an observation."

"Here is an observation. Your house is very nice. You did a good job with it. And I'll wait down here while you go up and change."

He laughed as he was going to suggest that. There was no reason to push his luck that much by bringing her upstairs.

But when he was coming down in jeans and sneakers and a cotton shirt, he said, "Do you want to see the one part of the house I did a lot of work in? I busted my ass down here for months. Had a bunch of friends come and help now and again but mainly my brothers."

"Sure," she said.

He brought her back toward the doorway off the kitchen. "I normally keep this door closed when no one is down there. I considered taking the door right off but thought at some point in my life I might have kids and the door would keep the noise out. And before you make a comment of why I didn't hire someone, there is a personal reward in doing something from start to finish on your own."

She nodded her head as if she understood what he might be saying. "Smart," she said. "Oh wow. This is the quintessential man cave."

"Thanks." He looked around at the wood floors that matched the upstairs. "The floors are heated. It was the only way to do it or I'd need to put throw rugs down and didn't want to."

"Throw rugs are a nice touch with decorating."

"I noticed you like to accessorize. I'm surprised your father allowed so many pops of color in the bar."

It was still a pub, but it wasn't as manly as it was before. Now it was light, bright, bold but still welcoming. There were splashes of colors on the walls with prints and canvases. He'd have to find out where she'd gotten some of them.

"It gives it life."

"Like those pictures everywhere. Where did you get them?"

She laughed. "I did some of them. Some were the kids at school."

"What? You like to paint?"

"I took a class with other teachers years ago. They've been sitting in my closet at home but I thought what the hell, let's see how they look. I don't think I'm that great at still life or animals."

"So the designs and patterns are yours?" he asked.

"Yeah. Those are easier and you can make mistakes and no one knows."

"They looked nice."

"Thanks. Anyway, it was years ago and I haven't done much more with it since. This is a nice bar. My father would be drooling over this space. You've got a great little galley kitchen too."

He took it as she was done talking about her hobby and since he'd done different activities over the years didn't think much of it.

"There's a guest room in the back, but I've got exercise equipment in it." He moved her to the other end. "Even the kitchen is more for the fact that when I've got people over

we can grab drinks down here or food. No going up and down the stairs. More for convenience. Same with having a bathroom down here too when people are over."

"How often do you have people over?"

"Football games more than anything. Just family and friends. Though I had a party after I finished this room to thank all those that helped. It was fun but not something I want to do often."

"Why? I would have figured you'd enjoy entertaining."

"Not really. I don't mind having people over for a game or a few beers. But that many people? I had it catered, people were everywhere. My brothers almost got into a fight down here. I was everywhere at once making sure no one spilled anything."

"I'm a little particular about my place too, but it's nothing like this. I don't think I'll ever have a place like this."

"You never know," he said. "Are you ready for food?"

"I could probably eat a pound of pasta myself."

"They've got great sauce there. I'm in the mood for ravioli."

"That sounds great too."

"Since it's just around the corner, do you want to ride over with me and then I'll bring you back here? Or you can follow me. It's easy."

She hesitated and finally said, "I'll follow you. Then I can stay right on the road and head home."

He nodded his head, knowing that he might have gone further than he should have tonight.



NIKKI WASN'T sure what to make of what was happening tonight. Why she agreed to any of this.

First the dinner, then following Colt to his house and now sitting across from him at the restaurant.

Their dinners were ordered with her opting for a soda tonight. He'd done the same thing. "You don't drink in public?" she asked.

"Of course I do. I just don't drink every night of the week. Not often during the week either."

"Same here. I'm normally working more than anything. And honestly, it's probably not viewed all that well with me being a teacher working in a bar. Since it was my father's place I don't think anyone thought anything of it."

"Is that why you didn't go anywhere else after he closed? Or do you only do it because it's his place?"

She wasn't sure she wanted to tell him. She was feeling inferior with his wealth and what he had, but then she had to tell herself to cut it out. He was a lawyer. Of course he made good money. At least she'd always thought lawyers did.

If she was having flashbacks of things others had that she didn't growing up, she had to remind herself she was a better person being independent and on her own.

"The extra money comes in handy. I've got student loans and teachers don't make that much money. At least when they first start. I could have stayed at home, but there comes a time when you need to not live with your father. That time was twenty-five when I finally finished my master's."

"For me it was twenty-five too. Grey and I had a place together for a short period of time. Then he bought his house and I stayed in our apartment before buying this place, then bought this place. My parents wanted us to stay home and put money away, but like you said...there comes a time."

"It can crimp your dating style big time living with Mom and Dad."

"And then some," he said, grinning. "Do you date often?"

"Aren't you just full of a million questions tonight?"

"My mother would tell you I came out of the womb asking where I was."

She laughed. "You've got a decent sense of humor."

"Don't sound so shocked. Now that you can see beyond what made you hate me so much I might be the type of guy that you'd be attracted to."

Damn him for zeroing in on that. She wondered if he'd caught her looking at his body a few times. "There is that cocky side of you again."

"I think you like cocky men too. You wouldn't be with someone that was a pushover."

"No. But the problem is when I'm with cocky men they don't always like someone that talks back."

"Then they are the wrong men. Everyone should have a voice."

"I've got one all right," she said, picking up her soda to take a sip.

"And are you going to say what is on your mind?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might," he said.

"It's probably best to just let it go," she said. She wasn't his type. She wouldn't be good enough for him. He probably always had functions and events and that wasn't her style.

As her father had said many times in her life, she spoke too much and didn't always have control over her thoughts as they ran out of her mouth.

"One thing you'll learn about me," he said. "I can't seem to let things go."

WELCOMING SMILE

“**O**h my God,” Nikki said to Colt when he walked in on Friday night at seven. “Did you bring your whole family?”

“Not all,” he said, smiling. “My brother Jake is working, but I’m sure he and Rachel will stop in with Reed and Taylor soon. Why don’t you seat us in your section so you can see I’ll leave a good tip.”

It’d taken some shuffling to make sure everyone was around to come out to dinner tonight. In the end he settled on his parents, Grey and Sierra and Alexa, Colin and Maggie.

“Colt, this is a nice place. Did you have any say in the decor?” his mother asked.

“No. But I did paint that side of the room when Nikki let me. I don’t think she trusted me too much though.”

Grey smirked at him. “Seems she trusts you enough now.”

He didn’t bother to respond to that.

The pub was busy. Not packed but only a few open tables. “How’s it been?”

“Steady,” Nikki said. “This is what a normal Friday night was like before. I didn’t expect it so fast again, but my father is thrilled.”

He looked over and saw Stan at the bar, waved his hand and then sat down at the tables that Nikki had pulled together for them. She laid down the menus and asked, "What can I get you all to drink?"

This was a different side of her. A friendly one. A big welcoming smile too.

He knew the ornery side and found he kind of liked that one too.

The one that had no problem challenging and telling him what was on her mind.

But tonight she was moving around from table to table, a pair of dark jeans on, a black shirt that had Nikki's on the front in a script to match the writing on the window in a nice teal color. He didn't know about the shirts but approved. Not that they'd ask his opinion. Simple black T-shirts that all the staff were wearing with black aprons around their waist holding pens and pads, hopefully lots of tips.

She moved off with their orders. "What do you think?" he asked everyone around the table.

"It's nice," his mother said. "I'm still a little in shock you did this, but then I started to put the pieces together."

"Not now," his father said, giving her the eye to keep her lips sealed.

He shook his head. His parents wouldn't think anything like his brothers that he might have his eye on Nikki. Hell, having his eye on a woman wasn't a reason for dropping that kind of cash down. He didn't do it for that.

No, they would know it was his way to try to make it all right.

Had he stayed at his last job and not gone to work for Ryan, then he probably wouldn't have done this. It wouldn't have looked right and even though he hated his part in it, he wouldn't jeopardize his job.

But once he was gone and knew he was settled in with Ryan, it was time to fix a wrong in his mind.

Even he didn't expect this was how he was going to do it. Though thinking he could just leave a large tip in a certified check was crazy even for him. And thinking back, Stan probably wouldn't have cashed it.

In the end this was the way to go.

"So, what can I get you all?" Nikki asked, coming back and laying their drinks down.

"Mom and Dad, this is Stan Brewster's daughter, Nikki. I didn't make the introduction when I first walked in."

"Which was rude of you," his mother said, laughing.

Nikki laughed. "I'm shocked he didn't do it too. We know he likes to talk."

Grey laughed. "She has you pegged."

"More than I'd like at times." Colt made the introductions quickly, as he knew she had work to do. Everyone gave their orders as he said their name.

"I'll take the brisket tacos. I hadn't realized you did that," he said.

"I convinced them to add a few new items. New name and colors, but I didn't think it'd be wise if we just tried to put lipstick on a pig."

Everyone laughed at the table. "No one would think that," he said but deep down he knew it was a smart move. It was better to change the menu with it.

"Well, I approve." She narrowed her eyes and he knew she might want to make a comment about not needing his approval, so he amended with, "I love tacos. Everything looks great."

"Thanks," she said, moving on to the bar.

"She is very friendly," Alexa said. "And stunning."

Leave it to Alexa to make that comment. "Leave Colt alone," Colin said.

"I like it when Alexa picks on her brothers," Maggie, Colin's daughter said. "Maybe someday I'll have a brother to do that to."

He looked at his future brother-in-law, having a hard time picturing his sister married let alone pregnant. Nope, not going there. She was still the annoying little girl in pigtails in his mind.

But Colin was a good guy and one that put family above everything else. He knew that first hand when he represented Colin to get full custody of his daughter from his psycho ex-wife.

"Not yet," Alexa said. "Your father and I need to get married first."

"But then I can have a baby brother or sister?" Maggie asked.

Colin was grinning but said, "Don't look at me. I swear your brothers are going to want to take me into the parking lot and give me a talking to."

"Highly unlikely," Alexa said. "You're bigger and tougher than them even if they don't want to admit it."

"No one is tougher or meaner than Jake," Colin said.

Which was probably true, but everyone at the table smiled and moved on to other conversations at this point.

Colt liked that his family was so laid back and supportive. And though he knew Nikki and Stan had support from friends and some family, it wasn't the same as he had. Not when she always made comments like, "It's just the two of us."



"COLT WASN'T KIDDING when he said he was bringing his whole family in."

Nikki was at the bar getting an order from her father when he made that comment. "One of his brothers isn't here with his wife. He's working but will be in another night I'm sure."

"You know a lot about his family to know that."

She didn't want to answer him, as it wasn't the time in her mind for this conversation. "We talk," she said. "Jake is an ex-Nightstalker for the Army. Now he's a medevac pilot at Albany Med."

"Love our servicemen and women," her father said and winked at her. Yeah, that would always put a warm spot in her father's belly.

"Of course we do," she said and then picked up her drinks to bring to another table.

"It's much busier than I thought it'd be," Michele said to her when they were both picking up food in the kitchen. "This is great. I hope it's not just a passing thing for a reopen."

"I hope not too, but I do expect that at some point the newness will wear off. That is why we've got to push while we can to get them coming back."

"I love the new items on the menu. And the specials. Nice touch."

"Thanks, but that was all Scott and Logan. When Dad and I talked about it, he mentioned they'd been asking to have specials like this for a while."

"Anything to get people in," Michele said.

"Completely agree," she said, picking up her dishes and moving on.

Just a small specials menu that had one appetizer, one specialty entree and a dessert seemed to be a big hit tonight. Even Colt's mother and brother got it along with a bunch of appetizers to split around the table.

Many more were getting it too and it seemed a lot of the new items were a big hit.

When she returned to the kitchen, the appetizers were ready for Colt's table so she picked them up and carried them out.

"That was fast," Colt said. "Is it always that fast of a turnaround?"

"Kind of. We try to do that. People come in to eat and drink so if they have to wait for it, they might not come back."

She'd drilled that into the servers' heads and even in the kitchen staff, not that she needed to because they were fast and efficient and it helped that they kept things on the menu that they could get out timely.

"And we want everyone to come back."

"Can I get anyone another drink?" she asked, looking around the table.

She wrote down two more beers for Colt's father and brother and then moved off.

And an hour later, she was back to see if they wanted dessert while she collected their dinner plates. Plates that were all mostly empty. "Does anyone need a take-home box?"

"There's nothing left to take home," Alexa said. "That is the best chicken sandwich I've ever had. It was so moist yet not messy at all. The sweet potato fries were to die for."

"I liked those fries too," Maggie said. "I've never had them, but I'm going to get them now every time I can."

"I'll pass that on to the kitchen. Does anyone have room for dessert?"

"I couldn't," Colt said. "Even though I'm dying to try the peanut butter pie. You'd have to roll me out of here if I had it."

"Maybe if there is any left you can sneak in and grab a slice before we open tomorrow," she offered and then wondered why she did. Would he think she wanted to see him again? Nah, she was just being friendly like she was to everyone else in the bar when she was working.

"Are you working all day tomorrow?" he asked.

"All weekend," she said. She'd be doing that for a while. Michele would be working too. Michele would work more since she did the afternoons when Alexa was at school during the week.

"That's a lot if it stays like this," Colt said.

"I can handle it," she said. But she already had resumes of waitresses to interview on Sunday morning. She couldn't pull the hours like this too long, but she wanted to see her father get back on his feet and the cash flowing more. She wouldn't take a paycheck, just the tips. That was more than enough for her.

She took two dessert orders. "Bring a few spoons out," Sierra said. "I know Grey is going to end up wanting a bite like he always does."

"Why don't you make it four pieces of pie," Alexa said. "All the guys are going to steal bites even when they say they don't want to."

"Will do," Nikki said and moved to put the order in.

When the dessert plates were all but licked clean, she brought the bill back over and Colt reached his hand for it. "Give it to me."

She did and walked away but heard his family all arguing over wanting to put money in. When she went back though, the billfold was there with his credit card sticking out of it. She snagged it and said, "I'll be right back."

Once Colt and his family were out the door, she moved over to start cleaning up the table. People were still coming in but not as fast. The rush was thinning and she might be able to steal a quick bite in a second herself.

When she went back to the bar with the bill, she opened it to give the signed receipt to her father and saw a lot of cash in there, not to mention a hundred-dollar tip on the credit card.

She'd heard Colt's family saying they were leaving the tip and she suspected that was what all the cash was, but damn him for still getting the final word in.

It was getting harder and harder to be mad at the guy when he did stuff like this. It was like he knew she wasn't taking a paycheck.

"Dad," she said. "Here you go. Tips for the bartender."

"That's for you," her father said.

"No. This was Colt's family and he left a tip on the card."

Her father took the receipt and looked at it. "That is one hell of a tip."

"Yeah. I've given up with him at this point. No reason to say anything. But the cash goes to you. Don't argue. It's from his family."

"I know not to argue with you either," her father said.
"Put it in the jar back there."

She moved to the back of the bar behind her father and stuffed all the cash in there. Her guess was it was another hundred or close to it. And her father's jar had plenty of twenties in it already.

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe it wasn't just her and her father anymore.

SEE MORE OF IT

“**S**ounds like it was a successful last several days,” Colt said to Nikki on Tuesday night. He’d wanted to know how they did but didn’t want to bother Stan. It’s not like he was checking in on his investment, but rather was hopeful for Stan.

“It really was. It was probably the biggest three days ever. I didn’t expect that so soon. I know it will slow down again and a lot of it was people coming out to support my father.”

“And you,” he said.

“Maybe. There were some teachers in there this weekend and that was nice to see.”

“Word will get out more. Are you doing any advertising that you’re open again?”

“Not yet. Just word of mouth. Social media. I didn’t want to use our previous social media accounts since it was our old name, nor direct them to the new place.”

“Might have been wise. You just don’t know any more what people will say or think. But I’ll keep spreading the word. I’m not on social media myself, so it’s not like I could post anything.”

Not that he would. It wasn’t his style. But he could bring menus to the office and keep them there.

"It's all good. You could have asked me this on the phone rather than wanting to meet for dinner. I'm beginning to think this might be a date more than friendly conversation."

He figured she would be smart enough to catch on.

Might as well call it what it was. "Is that a problem? You could have said no and you didn't."

"If it was a problem I would have said. My biggest concern is my father and complications."

"You're thinking too far ahead," he said. "It's dinner."

"You're right," she said.

He wasn't happy she agreed so easily but knew to just let it go.

"I like it when you say that since you don't say it often."

"Figure of speech," she said, grinning at him.

He loved when he could get her to smile.

Yep, his family was right. She was stunning with her brown hair flowing around her shoulders. Her light brown eyes had a shine to them when she smiled or looked happy. It didn't seem to be often, but he caught it and wanted to see more of it.

She didn't wear a lot of makeup and didn't need it. It was more like she just had this natural beauty.

If he didn't know her personally and the way she was with him, he'd say her personality had a lot to do with it too. Some people, the beauty was inside more than out. He was glad he'd been able to see it lately.

He was finding it on both levels as he didn't mind her snarky attitude toward him. He actually kind of preferred it and wondered what that said about him as a person.

"So you're going to be working Thursday through Sunday again next week?"

"I am. But I hired another waitress so I don't have to work full shifts after this weekend. I'll make sure she is trained and knows what she is doing and then I can go back to just working a few nights as needed. Part of me feels like I should do it for a month or so on the busy days."

"But you've got another job and work to do after hours for that. I know. Alexa says all the time work doesn't end at the end of each day."

"No. She's right. Over the summer it's not a big deal. But school just started. I'm catching kids up. We are diving in and so on."

"And it's going to wear you out," he said.

"Are you concerned about me?" she asked, then moved back when their dinner was placed in front of them. They'd been here about thirty-five minutes already and the service was much slower than normal. He wasn't even comparing it to Nikki's last night.

"Don't need you worn out. We know I'd be useless if they were shorthanded for bussing tables." She started to laugh. "What's so funny?"

"I'm picturing you in your suit and tie moving around with an apron on and a tray in your hand."

He squinted one eye at her. "I'd at least have jeans and a T-shirt on."

"You look good in jeans and a T-shirt," she said.

Now they were getting somewhere. "I'm surprised you would admit that."

"I think we established this is more a date. Wouldn't you want to know that?"

"Most definitely. Which means I can tell you how good you look too."

"I do try," she said.

He hadn't seen her in anything other than jeans, but these were a pair of olive green ones with a gray fitted sweater that was off the shoulders and gray ankle boots on her feet. Not high heels, but two-inch thicker ones.

"For me?" he asked.

"No, for that dude at the bar. He hasn't noticed me yet though. Maybe I should move over and take up the seat next to him and see if I can get him to buy me a drink."

"Or maybe not," he said, grinning at her. "So if this was a date, how come I didn't get to pick you up?"

She shrugged. "Not sure. You didn't ask."

"You'd let me next time?"

"Will there be a next time?" she asked.

"I want a next time. The question is, do you?"

"I think I might want it. Not sure yet. I'm still reserving judgment."

"I'm good in a courtroom," he said.

"That isn't the kind of judgment I was talking about."

"I know," he said, going back to his meal. They were making a lot more progress in his eyes. But since he wasn't bringing her home, he was sure he wasn't going to be able to sneak a kiss in there. Not unless they did it in the parking lot and she wasn't parked anywhere near him.

He wasn't the type to make out like a teen in public either. Not good for his reputation. And that was one thing he tried hard to keep clean.

Why else would he have left the job he worked so hard at?

It'd taken him a long time to work up the nerve to do it. He was afraid he'd lose too much of himself if he stayed, and if he left and flopped, then he'd find a way to work himself back up.

He didn't like the opinion people had of him while he was there. He didn't like the one he had of himself either.

But he'd be at peace with himself either way. He was positive now that he was starting over.

"So tell me about yourself," she said.

"Like what? I think you know quite a lot and you've even met my family."

"I suppose, but that's not the same thing. I know you left your last job and started a new one. But what about you as a person? What do you like to do other than drink beer and watch football?"

"I watch more than football and I don't always drink that much beer. Don't think that."

He didn't want her to assume he was some alcoholic. Maybe she was thinking it with wanting to own part of the bar.

"I know you don't. You don't drink during the week. Just like now."

"And neither do you," he said.

"It wouldn't look good. On a night out here or there is fine. But working where I do... I try to be more aware."

"Same here," he said. "Shit can come back to bite you in the ass when you least expect it."

"Considering it's felt like I've sat on a pile of fire ants a time or two in my life, I know that feeling."

"Because of your father's bar and your mother passing?" he asked, curious if there was more to it.

"Let's just say I don't always have the best taste in men either."

"Now you know I'm going to ask what that is about," he said.

She smiled. "I figured you would. It's not much more than not everyone enjoys my glowing personality."

"I'm not the only one that has seen that side of your tongue?"

"I am who I am. I'm aware enough to not do that when I'm teaching or at the bar."

"But it's still there and needs to come out and that means it comes out with friends and family. Significant others?"



NIKKI DIDN'T WANT to get into this conversation, but she guessed she had it coming. She brought up wanting to

know more about him so it was only natural he'd ask some of the same things.

"It happens," she said. "I don't take shit from people even when my father has lectured me that everyone has bad days. Unfortunately, I could start dating someone and find out they have a lot of bad days."

"Must be the type of men you attract," he said.

She narrowed her eyes. "Is that a shot at me working in a bar?"

"See. Look at that. There you go. Just what you said you do. It didn't take long either."

She felt her face turn red. "Yeah. I'm used to jumping the gun."

"Why is that?"

"Not sure. My father says I'm like my mother, but I have no idea. I think I'm a little like them both. I like to be heard. I don't like to be told what to do."

"We are all told what to do at points in our life. I sure the hell don't either, but I know it happens. In a courtroom the judge rules even if I don't care for it. And man, if you piss one off."

"Have you had that happen before?"

"I think everyone has. I don't intentionally try to, but it can happen without you even knowing what you said to make it occur."

"Maybe judges just hate lawyers too."

He rolled his eyes at her. "No comment. So just bad taste in men? They don't like you're outspoken?"

"Mainly. I've never been one to look for a major commitment. I'm young still in my eyes. Twenty-eight isn't that old. Though you're probably a lot older."

"Over a half a dozen years," he said. "Close to adding another on top of that."

"You look good for your age."

"Gee, thanks for that."

She laughed. "You can have a prickly personality too."

"I can. It's been mentioned in my family before. I think I went into law because my mother always said I'd argue until I was blue in the face and that maybe I should put it to good use."

"It seems like you are trying to now."

"I've always tried," he said. "It just wasn't turning out the way I wanted it to."

It was the way he said it that led her to believe that there was more going on than he might be willing to tell her.

LITTLE GREEN MONSTER

The following Wednesday a storm blew through town out of nowhere. It lasted about thirty minutes, but the winds were high and eerie and the power went down. Nikki walked out of her apartment and looked around and saw tree limbs everywhere. She'd just gotten home from school not that long ago.

She called her father to see if the pub had power and it did, but that was several miles from her place. She lived close to her father and wondered if he had it at his house or not.

She couldn't think much of it since she was due at the pub in twenty minutes.

She changed quickly, using her flashlight to find the jeans she wanted that were stacked on a shelf in her closet, then dug her Nikki's shirt out of a drawer.

When she got to the pub, she came in shaking her head. "I can't believe there is power. I can see it's out everywhere coming here. It's almost hit or miss though. There are wires down and tree limbs all over."

"I heard it on the scanner," her father said. He still listened to it often.

"Do you know if you've got it at home or not?" she asked. "Or has anyone said how long it'd be out?"

Her father picked up the remote and flipped one of the TV's over the bar to the local news and they heard the storm spanned twenty miles in all directions and the damage was extensive. There were pictures of fires and roofs collapsed, trees on cars. She supposed she was lucky.

"I just texted Bill," her father said of his neighbor. "No power on our street either but no damage that he could see. So that helps."

"Well, I'm going to get on social media and say we've got power. People might want to come in to eat and drink. Whatever works, right?"

"That's my girl."

And when Colt came in a few hours later, she stopped and said, "Did you lose power too? Looking for food?"

"It's out on my street, but I've got a generator and it just flips right on."

Of course he did. "Lucky you for thinking of that."

He laughed at her. She knew he would read between the lines. She was trying not to be sarcastic, but it came out anyway and at the oddest of times. Little green monster showing its head for no reason.

"It came with the house. The previous owners had some health issues and had it installed. I've found it is nice to have, but don't think much of it. Jake has one in his house too and they lost power, but it was Rachel's house and Chapmans put it in when they built it."

"I don't know that I've ever known anyone with a generator growing up. Or even now."

"It's a softer society," he said. "More people are used to having them. Either way, I came down to see how the pub was doing and if there was any damage, but it looks to be hopping."

"It is. It's been steady with people wanting to eat. I haven't even had a chance to see if I've got power back at my place."

"Don't plan on it. They are saying some areas are going to be out for days."

"What?" she asked. "You're joking, right?"

"Nope. My brother is out in Paradise Place too, but since he and Sierra work at the hospital, they are just going in early and showering there. The worst part is the house will be cold, but not so cold that pipes will freeze this time of year."

"It's still down in the forties and fifties at night," she said, thinking of how little sun came into her tiny place and she'd be freezing her butt off. Not to mention all the food she'd be throwing away. The least of her worries. "I wonder if my school lost it or not. If they will cancel."

"It doesn't look like Bethlehem got hit. It seemed to miss them, so you'll be going to work tomorrow."

"Hang on, I'll be back. I need to bring this order." She'd been standing at the bar while her father filled her drink order. He was busy as the bar didn't have one open seat at it and the tables were turning over fast too.

When she came back, Colt was behind the bar with her father. "What are you doing?" she said.

"Not much more than filling beer. I can handle that," he said.

"I need the help," her father said. "Leave him alone and go do your thing."

A little after nine they were getting ready to close and had to actually kick people out. Part of her felt a little bad about that. Her father and Colt had been answering the phone in between customers to say they were open and serving food too.

"That was crazy," Colt said. "Good thing I'm not working tomorrow. Or I'll work from home since the office is out of power and they are giving a two-day timeline there."

"Where can you see timelines?" she asked.

"Go to National Grid's site and check the map." She did what he said and felt her face pale. "It looks like almost

three days for us. Are you kidding me?" She checked her father's address to see if his was the same and it was. "Dad, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going home. No reason not to," he said. "I'm hardy and can light the woodstove. I'll have to throw some food out, but that doesn't bother me."

"Cold showers," she said to him, shivering. She wasn't hardy enough for that more than once. Her hair took too long to wash and though she could take sponge baths, it was starting to give her the heebie-jeebies. Urgh, not to mention she couldn't even dry her hair. What a nightmare.

"I've gone through worse," her father said. "Don't worry about me. I can jump in and out fast and I don't have much hair anyway."

"Why don't you guys come stay at my place?" Colt said. "I've got plenty of room and bathrooms. Three full-sized ones and a half. It's not a problem."

"I'm good," her father said. "But, Nikki, you should. I'm just here at the bar. You've got to go to school and you get ornery if you can't bathe."

"It's gross," she said. "If I didn't have to leave the house I could deal with it, but I've got to."

"My offer stands," Colt said. "Your choice. Unless you are afraid for some reason."

Her father laughed at her and walked to the other end of the bar to clean up. They were almost done and ready to lock up for the night with Colt putting chairs on the tables that she'd wiped down.

"I'm not afraid of anything. Just thinking. Dad," she said, "there are a lot of people in the area without power or the ability to cook. What do you think about doing takeout? We can take advantage of this situation to help get our name out with the new menu too."

"I don't want to take advantage of others' plight," her father said.

She knew he would say that. "We won't. Run specials. Takeout only. Scott and Logan are still here, call them out and see what they think and could do."

Her father looked at Colt and that just annoyed the hell out of her. But Colt said, "I think it's a great idea if you can handle it."

"We should be able to if Scott and Logan can. I guess the question is what they could do with those specials?" her father said.

She finished picking up the chairs and putting them on tables with Colt. She normally cut out before this part of the cleaning since she had to work the next day but because she had no power, she didn't want to go home and sit in the dark either. Hell, she wasn't even sure where the flashlight was now and knew she'd be stumbling around the house with the light on her phone.

By the time she was done with Colt's help, her father, Scott and Logan were talking and writing things down.

"What's the plan?" she asked.

"They are going to run a few specials for this. Pans of spaghetti and meatballs, salads, bread, and some dessert. It should feed a family of four. They also thought of doing some hardy mac and cheese and soups. If they aren't selling for takeout, we'll sell them here too. If we run out, the pasta is easy enough to make more of. What do you think?" her father said.

"Would people still be able to order off the menu too? Or are you limiting it?"

"I think they can order off the menu, but it will take longer. This special will get more orders in and it's easy. But I'm wondering if we should stick to one thing."

"Are you sure you guys want to do this?" she asked. "I can put it out there on the social media accounts tonight, but once I'm in school, it's going to be harder for me to do it and we want the word out."

"I can do it," Colt said. "If you trust me enough to give me the passwords and access to them to post it."

"Of course," her father said before she could give an answer. And it's not like she could say no. It wasn't her business. Colt actually owned more than she did. Her percentage was a big whopping zero.

She grabbed a piece of paper. "I'll write them down for you."

"Or you can go get a change of clothes and come back to my place and you can tell me exactly what you want me to do and say when your father figures it out for sure before they open tomorrow."

"Even better," her father said.

She felt like she was outnumbered and then had to remind herself that she'd been out with Colt five times now. In the past week, they'd had dinner another time.

He even kissed her the last time when they were leaving. He hadn't picked her up once yet and she'd been putting that off, as she didn't want him to see her place. But she did go to his house and he drove them to the restaurant since she wasn't sure where they were going.

And when they'd gotten back to his place, he asked if she wanted to go in for coffee, which she agreed to.

Part of her wanted to know how he kissed. How she felt in his arms.

She wasn't a hundred percent in the trust category with him, but she was getting there. If she wasn't then they wouldn't have been dating as much as they were.

But when Colt walked her to the door for her to leave after that last date, he didn't even hesitate to lean his head down and put his mouth on hers. It was light and it was soft and it was slow.

Not what she wanted.

So she wound her arms around his neck, opened her mouth on his and deepened the kiss more.

Yeah, that was what she'd been waiting for.

The heat and the burn. His large hands on her back, then sliding up and down her sides. Chills and tingles erupted everywhere and she wanted to stay to feel more but told herself to get the hell out of there.

Now here she was planning to spend the night in his house.

Talk about a perfect storm. And not the one that just ripped through the area.

NOT THE BEST TIMING

Colt had made the offer to both Stan and Nikki because it was the right thing to do. He felt bad for those without power. No one in his family was having any issues. Alexa and Colin and his parents didn't lose it. Grey and Sierra weren't concerned in the least since they were at the hospital more. Jake and Rachel had no concerns either. His house was open to any that needed it.

Had he wanted it to turn out this way? Hell yeah!

Would he take advantage of it?

It depended on how much she was willing to.

Tonight though, it was more about her getting some clothes and then returning to his house to go over things for Nikki's.

"Why don't you go home and get some stuff, Nikki?" her father suggested. "I can close down and finalize everything with Scott and Logan and we'll let Colt know tomorrow once we see what food we can buy."

"I guess. It's getting late. By the time I grab clothes and get to Colt's it's going to be way past ten," she said.

"Want me to bring you there?" Colt offered. "It's going to be dark and maybe it'd be nice to have someone else carry stuff out too."

"That sounds like a good idea," Stan said.

"I just need enough for tonight," she said. "It might be on tomorrow."

"It might," he said, but he wasn't banking on it.

"Fine," she said. "I can tell when I'm outnumbered. We can go drop your car off and I can drive you over with me since I know the way."

If she expected him to argue, he was going to prove her wrong. "Works for me."

She turned and frowned at him and he reached out and tapped her on the nose.

Nikki turned and looked at her father who wasn't even paying attention. Maybe he shouldn't have made that move, but Stan wasn't stupid and knew Nikki and he had been out to dinner a handful of times.

They dropped his car off at his place, then he turned and hopped in her vehicle. It didn't take long to get to her apartment, maybe fifteen minutes.

"My drive tomorrow will be longer," she said, parking in the dark lot.

"So? You'll have a nice warm shower in the morning. Probably one tonight if you want after working."

She turned to look at him. "Yeah. I need it. I'm exhausted, but I have to shower after working. It's just a pet peeve of mine."

"Same here. I shower a few times a day. Morning for sure, after I work out, or if I don't, just after dinner. Not sure why. When I was a kid I didn't think much of it, but as an adult, I've got a thing about sweating or being in the same clothes all day."

"I think as kids we didn't care. I feel that way at the school. Some of those kids might go days without washing. You can see it with their greasy hair. And it's not like they are low income families."

"Laziness," he said, following behind her as she was walking to her building. They both had their flashlight apps on their phones working.

"Exactly." She opened the door. "Don't judge my place. It's nothing like yours. It's only a one bedroom on top of it."

"I wouldn't judge it even if I could see anything," he said, looking around with his phone, but he was doing it more to not bump into anything.

"I'm just going to grab a bag to put my stuff in."

He followed her into her room. "Want me to hold the bag so you can put the stuff in it?"

"Sure. You can be my helper." She started to move through the racks and grabbed a pair of pants and jeans off a shelf, then a shirt at random in his mind. She put the light on the ground, found shoes and shoved them in there too.

"Why not grab more than one outfit?" he said. "Just to cover yourself so you don't have to come back?"

"You like telling people what to do, don't you?" she asked.

He could hear the sarcasm in her voice. "Just a suggestion."

"I'm hoping the power is back on tomorrow, but if it's not, then when I'm leaving work I'll come back and grab more clothes. It will be daylight out and I won't have to just grab black pants and know that any shirt will match."

He laughed. "Good thinking."

"I might be smarter than the average bear," she said. "Now back up so I can get out of here and get my underclothes and things from the bathroom."

He was trying not to let his mind wander to what her underclothes looked like. He'd bet she wore bright colored panties and bras. Then he told himself to not let his mind go there. Not now. Not tonight. Even if she would be getting naked in his house while she showered.

While she ran her hands over her wet body.

When his dick started to shift in his jeans he was in trouble.

The bag in his hand moved and he knew she just stuffed some more things in there. Underclothes...

"Let's move to the bathroom and then get out of here."

He followed behind her and went the few steps to the bathroom while she opened up the shower. "I've got shampoo and soap unless you need special kinds."

"Thanks. I need conditioner though. Do you have a hairdryer?"

"Somewhere. I think. Yeah, I know I do."

"Just in case, I'll grab mine," she said and shoved it in the bag with conditioner and some other hair product, a toothbrush, a comb and deodorant. He was trying not to watch, but it was better than staring off into the dark.

"Ready now?" he asked.

"Yep. Let's go. It's already past my bedtime and I want to shower quick anyway."

By the time they were back at his house, he walked to his car and unlocked it, then hit the garage door opener to move in, her following behind his car with her bag over her shoulder.

When they were in the house, he flipped the lights on in the kitchen. "Do you want anything to eat or drink?"

"I'm good. I just want to get ready for bed. Do you need to make the bed or anything?"

"Nope. Beds are made. Sheets are clean, don't worry," he said, smiling at her. She seemed uneasy and he didn't want that either.

She trailed behind him when he went up the stairs. "I've got two rooms for you to choose from. I don't care either way. One next to the bathroom, one across the hall."

"Where's your room?" she asked.

"The end of the hall? Why? Did you want to go there instead?"

She laughed. "I'm not sure that is wise for either of us."

"Probably not the best timing for anything," he agreed though he wished it wasn't true. "Do you want to go over everything in the morning in terms of the social media stuff?"

"Crap. I forgot about that. Yeah, if we can. I'm an early riser anyway."

"Same here," he said.

"I'll take this room by the bathroom. Further away from yours."

He wasn't sure what to make of that. "So you aren't tempted?"

She laughed at him again and the buddy in his jeans wanted to stand up and ask her to stop doing that. But he just nodded his head and said, "I'll go get shampoo and soap with some towels for the bathroom."

"Thanks," she said, moving into the room. "This is nice and big."

He was already a few steps away and shouted back. "You did pick the bigger of the rooms, but it's the same size bed in both of them."

He grabbed the spare bottle of shampoo he had, a bar of soap, two towels and washcloths and walked back down the hall.

She was coming out of the room and met him there as he set it all down. "Um, I forgot to grab something to sleep in. I don't suppose you could loan me a T-shirt?"

"Not a problem," he said, going back to his room and grabbing one at random. "Here you go."

"Thanks," she said, shutting the door in his face. That was going to be the end of their night, he was sure.

He went back to his room and decided to jump in the shower too. There was enough water pressure; there wouldn't be a problem. And if he was doing something he wouldn't worry or think of where her hands were on her naked body.

When he was done, he walked back down the hall, saw the bathroom door open and said from the hallway, "Do you need anything else before I turn in?"

"How about a kiss?" she said softly.

He walked the last few steps and turned into the room to see her standing there in his shirt that reached her thighs. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"What's that, Colt?"

"Messing with my head?"

"Ah, but is it really messing with it or did you expect this?"

He snorted. "Kind of expected it. But didn't think I'd get the kiss, so that makes me happy."

"Not sure why you didn't think that when I enjoyed the one from the other night."

She wound her arms around his neck, went up on her tiptoes and put her mouth to his. She deepened the kiss just like she had the other night and he pulled her close to his growing erection. There was no way she couldn't feel it and he wanted her to know the effect she was having on him anyway.

When she was done with the kiss, she pushed him back and said, "Goodnight, Colt."

"Night, Nikki." Then he turned and went back to his room...alone.

MORE CAUTIOUS

The next morning, Nikki finished drying her hair and brushed her teeth, then opened the bathroom door. She'd seen the light on under the door in Colt's room when she'd gotten up twenty minutes ago. Either he got up earlier than her or couldn't sleep either.

The guest bed was nice and comfortable. The sheets were soft. The noise...there wasn't any. The house was quiet and she wasn't used to that living in her apartment.

But her mind had too much banging around. It wouldn't quiet down no matter how much she wished it would.

She made her way to the kitchen and found Colt drinking coffee while he sat on one of the stools against the counter. He had his laptop open and it looked like he was reading some news. "Any updates on the power outage? I checked on my phone this morning and saw that it's still looking like two days before my area has it again."

"There is a lot of damage and it's all over the place," he said. "Mine is scheduled to be back by later tonight, but I'm good either way."

"Thanks again for letting me stay here. I appreciate it. Hopefully mine will be set today and it won't be an issue."

"It's not an issue either way if you want to stay here."

"I'm not sure I want another sleepless night," she said.

He looked up and smirked at her. “Join the club. You made that choice though playing with fire.”

She had and she knew it. She had no one to blame but herself. “Sometimes it’s worth it to play with fire. Other times you get burned.”

“I don’t think either one of us will get burned, but the matches are in your hand to start it when you’re ready.”

“I’m still collecting the kindling.”

He smiled. “Help yourself to anything you want. Coffee is made, there is bread, eggs, oatmeal and yogurt. Not sure what you normally eat. I don’t have any cereal, it’s just not my thing.”

“Got peanut butter?” she asked.

He got up and opened the pantry, pulled it out, then made himself another cup of coffee. “Here you go.”

“Are you going to eat anything?”

“I had eggs already and toast. I’m here all day so I’ll stay out of your way. When you’re ready to show me what you want done for Nikki’s just let me know.”

She’d forgotten about that again. She’d always had the pub on her mind before.

“Do you have a piece of paper so I can write down the passwords?”

He grabbed a pad from a drawer and put it down next to him with a pen. While the bread was in the toaster, she wrote down the passwords to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. “Do you know how to use any of these sites?”

“I’m sure it’s not that hard.”

“So you aren’t on any social media?”

“Nope. No desire to be. As I said, I’m sure I can figure it out. What was it you said— you’re smarter than the average bear?”

The toast popped up and she put the peanut butter on it, then made herself a cup of coffee. She liked coffee but wasn’t one of those people that had to have it the minute they stumbled into the kitchen like so many others.

She sat down next to him and asked, "Can I?" reaching for his computer.

He pushed it over to her. "I'm just going to sign in and save and bookmark them for you. Or would you rather I don't?"

"That works for me just fine. Guess you trust me with that information."

"You own part of the bar, as it's been pointed out many times."

He frowned. "How come you don't?"

"I don't want it."

"Then why make that comment? And why don't you?"

"It's my father's dream. Not mine. I do it for him, but it's a lot of work. I love my teaching job and it's exhausting to do both. If any of it were in my name, I'd feel more responsible than I do. I don't have much on the line like he does."

"But you acted like you did before and do now."

"Because he's my father and I want him happy," she said. It was funny that Colt pointed that fact out to her.

"Which is great but still doesn't explain your behavior before and now. Or the time you put in. You act like you want to, but if your father knew you felt this way, he'd tell you to not work so hard."

"Exactly," she said. "Which is why he doesn't know and if you know what is good for you, you won't tell him either."

"I get it," Colt said.

"What do you get?"

"That we all make sacrifices for our family."

"We do," she said. "He made a lot for me my whole life. He made a lot for my mother. I'm sure he didn't want to spend his entire life a single father. It wasn't the plan for him and my mother. She was finishing up before she was going to leave. But..."

His hand reached over and he laid it on hers. "Hey. Let's just talk about today. Eat your breakfast and show me how

to do these things. I can see how and what you did with your other posts and go from there once I get the information from your father.”

She cleared her throat. She couldn’t believe she was actually a little emotional just now when she usually held it in most of her life. Why? Because of her father.

Were her father and Colt right? That she put on such a nice face for work and the pub that outside of that, her snarkiness came out more.

When she was younger, she had less control and didn’t care if she offended someone. Not even the men she was dating. Most left at some point anyway, so the sooner the better if they couldn’t handle her.

Months ago, she didn’t care so much what she said to Colt in the beginning. But now, she was more cautious with him. Again, she wasn’t sure why when they’d only had a handful of dates.

Then she told herself it probably had to do with the fact that now Colt was tied to Nikki’s and again, her father’s dream would come first.

When she knew her father was set and stable, she could cut back.

Once she’d shown everything to Colt, she finished her breakfast and then went to the sink and cleaned up her dishes. “I should probably make sure I’ve got what I need before I leave. It might take longer to get there if roads are closed.”

“Could be,” he said. “Do you need something for lunch? Or do you buy food at the school?”

She smiled. “I didn’t expect you to be so much of a homemaker. Or even like a little mom.”

He started to cough on the coffee he sipped. “What?”

“Helping me get my clothes. Suggesting I get more than one day’s worth. Giving me all the bathroom supplies. Now you are asking if I need lunch.”

"I'd call that being considerate and a good host over being motherly. Or do you still have such a low opinion of me that you think I can't be considerate?"

She felt bad she'd said that and made him feel that way, but she didn't want to apologize either. Part of her was joking and she wanted to see if he was going to be sensitive or not. She wasn't going to be able to handle being with someone who took offense to everything. She thought he was stronger than that.

"Can't you take a joke?"

"I can take a lot of jokes," he said. "I can give it back too. What I want to know is what is in your head. One minute you're teasing me and kissing me and making comments about playing with fire and now you're insulting me because I wanted to make sure you had everything you needed."

"It's not an insult. I just found it funny."

"Because I'm a lawyer and a piece of shit in your eyes?"

"Wow, what has gotten into you? Maybe this wasn't a good idea."

He stood up and moved closer to her and got in her personal space. "What got into me is that I lay in bed all night thinking of you in my shirt down the hall. I thought of you making the moves more than me because I'm trying to be considerate of your feelings because of how we met. And then I got thinking maybe this is all a game to you. That you might be playing with me as a way to get back for what happened."

She stepped back, her jaw opening. "Talk about an insult."

"So you can feel something?"

"Huh?" she asked.

"Your reaction told me what I needed to know just now."

She crossed her arms. "What is that?"

"If it was a game you wouldn't have been so offended. So all I can say is I just don't know what to expect from you."

I'm not used to dating someone who hated my guts before and it's making me question motives."

"I've got no motives like that," she said. "You're making me sound like a monster."

"Come here," he said, reaching for her.

"No."

"Yes," he said and pulled her into his arms and held her.

She felt herself softening and wondered what it was about Colt that made her question everything about herself when she hadn't before.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

His hand was running up and down her back. "I'm not sure. Comforting you maybe? It's been a rough couple of months for you. I like you," he said. "I can be honest and say that. I think you like me."

"I believe that goes without saying. Or before we get into these little spats."

"I'm not sure we can put the past behind us, but can we try to move forward more? Or maybe just tell me what you are looking for."

"Meaning?" she asked.

"I said day by day before. You're worried about complications. What I want to know is are you just looking for someone to pass the time or the possibility of more? You've made comments about horrible taste in men. Mine in women hasn't been so hot. It's obvious we both have flaws so the question is, are we even on the same page at this point?"

"I don't know what I want," she said.

"Then think about it and let me know," he said, stepping back.

She nodded her head and went back to the bedroom to get her shoes and purse. When she came back down, she moved over to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek before she left. "Thank you for everything. I don't have to think too hard to say that I'm always open to possibilities."

"That's enough for now," he said.

But by the end of the day, she had to concede that another night in Colt's house was going to leave her staring at the ceiling again if she didn't do something about it.

She'd been checking the updates on the power every chance she could get on her phone and it was still going to be close to two days.

On breaks, she noticed that Colt did a great job promoting the pub. Maybe even better than her. There were pictures, telling her that he'd gone to the pub to take them along with poses of Logan and Scott making the sauce and meatballs. Putting the salads together. There were several of the specials together showing people what they were getting for the money.

She left the school, ran home and grabbed clothes for two more days, just in case. This time she got something to sleep in too so she didn't have to ask to sleep in Colt's shirt again.

She went back to his house and walked to the front door, then rang the bell.

"Why didn't you just come in?" he said, opening it.

"Because it's not my house and it could have been locked."

"It's not locked so just come in," he said. "How was work?"

She started to laugh. "Sorry. It goes back to asking me about having lunch today."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"Now you're just playing with me," she said, punching his arm.

"Two can do that you know."

"Yeah, they can. I need to change quick and head to the pub. Do you know how things are going there? By the way, great job with the social media."

"Thanks. I'm going to go with you. Last I checked there are a crazy amount of specials ordered for pickup between

five and six.”

“Don’t you have to work?” she asked. It was a little after four now.

“I’m good. I started earlier. I get my time in and then some. Trust me there.”

It was the way he said it that made her wonder what that was about. But she figured he might work more than her at times too.

“Okay. I’m going to change fast and then go. I don’t need to wait on tables unless they want me to, but I’m sure my father would appreciate someone dealing with the pickup and takeout.”

“That was my thought.”

She went upstairs and changed and then came right back down. “Let’s go.”

When they pulled into the parking lot, there were more cars than she thought there’d be. “Wow,” Colt said. “Looks busy already.”

“It sure does.” They walked in the door and her father had the bar filled and was talking with people.

“Am I glad you’re here,” her father said. “We’ve got twenty orders of the specials to be picked up around five. Then another thirty before six. The calls keep coming in. I’ve been keeping track for the kitchen to see if we’ll run out. I’m getting nervous.”

“Do you need me to run to the store and get anything?” Colt asked.

“Can you go check with Scott and find out? We might need it or I have to stop taking orders. I don’t want to do that.”

“I’ll grab what we need,” Colt said and moved to the kitchen.

“He’s been great today,” her father said. “I can’t believe the orders we are getting. It was his idea to run it until seven.”

“Smart,” she said.

"He is that," her father said.

Colt came back out. "I've got a list and I'll be back."

She watched him leave, then got behind the bar. "I'll help you until he gets back. Unless Scott needs me."

"Go find out. Fill in back there more if they need it. Colt said he'd do whatever was needed today too. If one of you can check out people as they come in by the door and the other in the kitchen, I think we can get it covered."

"Teamwork, right, Dad?"

"It's not just the two of us anymore," her father said.
"Remember that."

SWEET AND SPICY

“I can’t believe how tired I am,” Colt said when he and Nikki got back to his place.

“That was crazy. That might be the most food that we’ve turned out in one night. And it’s Thursday on top of it.”

“More people will be getting power by tomorrow, so even if it’s one day it was great and got the word out.”

“I think they should do it again tomorrow,” she said. “I told Dad and Scott that, but he said they’d talk about it later.”

“I’ll keep you posted then if I can,” he said. “Your father will let me know so I can post it for customers.”

“You did good,” she said. “I told my father it was smart to have it stop at seven. I’m dead on my feet right now.”

“We had a good rhythm with me in the kitchen and putting the orders together once they were made and you checking everyone out.”

“You might have found a second career in foodservice,” she said, smiling. “Everything was packaged in bags so nicely with their names on it.”

He shook his head. “I need a shower. I’m afraid I’ve got sauce seeping out of my pores and it’s hotter than hell in the kitchen.”

He wasn't sure the last time he sweated that much and for that long. Nikki said she was dead on her feet, but he felt the same and a shower was calling his name.

"That is how I feel when I get done working there too."

"Well, we've got dinner for us," he said. He'd grabbed a tin of the spaghetti and a few meatballs and some salad and bread. Scott and Logan were good about knowing what to make and not having too much left over. Just enough that they were able to fill a few last minute orders and for Nikki and him to grab some dinner.

"We do. But a shower is a must. For both of us," she said, getting close and sniffing him.

He moved toward the stairs after leaving the dinner on the counter. "You always smell good to me," he said, his nose moving closer to her. "Sweet and spicy at the same time."

"No comment," she said, moving past him, her ass swishing and teasing him one more time. He was almost too tired to admire it. No, no. That was a lie.

Once he was cleaned up, he moved back downstairs and got the dinner ready, took out some plates and grabbed a few bottles of water.

"Don't say it," he said when she went to open her mouth and say something about having dinner on the table. "Men are known to be homemakers too. My mother would kick my ass if she thought I relied on a woman to do everything for me."

"I was going to say thank you."

"That's your story and you are sticking to it," he said. "I get it."

She only laughed at him but sat down to start filling her plate. "Scott is a good cook, isn't he?"

"He is," Colt said, filling his mouth. "This is to die for. I've had to smell it for hours and couldn't wait to get some of my own."

"My father is lucky they wanted to come back. He hated letting them go, but they were more than willing to return."

"I think your father inspires loyalty."

"He does," she said. "What about me?"

"I think you do. When you want to let someone in."

She put her fork down and stood up, then grabbed him by the shirtfront and kissed him hard. "I want to open up. Right now. You and me. Upstairs. We have enough food in us to give us energy."

He laughed and put his hands under her arms and lifted her up, her legs wrapping around his waist. "I'm not even going to ask you if you're sure. You know your mind better than anyone else I've ever met."

"Then shut up for once and bring me to the couch."

"Nope, going upstairs on the bed for the first time. I'd have to go up to get a condom anyway and I'm not wasting any time running up and then coming back down."

"Stop talking, Colt," she said, putting her mouth to his.

He started to walk up the stairs as best as he could holding her while her hips ground against his stiff cock. If he didn't get there fast and undress her and bury himself in her he was going to come like an inexperienced youth.

Nope, not happening. He'd been waiting too long and wasn't going to ruin the first time.

He pushed the door open to his room with his foot and set her down on the bed while he got a condom out of the bathroom. When he returned she was already pulling her shirt over her head.

"Can't wait for me?"

"No. I thought of this all night down the hall and I'm too worked up. Start undressing or I'm going to do it for you."

He pulled his shirt over his head and toed his shoes off. She was unbuttoning her jeans and pushing them down her legs too. They were both standing there in their underclothes and reaching for the other.

"I was right," he said.

"About what?" she asked.

"Your bright bra and panties."

"My spicy side," she said, her mouth going to his, then turning him and pushing him on the bed. "And this side of me wants to see what is under those boxer briefs of yours. By the way, that gym of yours must get a lot of use. Who would have known?"

What every guy wanted to hear. That the woman that was half naked on top of him and pushing her hands around the waist of his underwear was complimenting his body.

"The same goes," he said. "You've got more on top than I thought you did."

"Don't waste time admiring," she said. "Do something about it."

He liked how bold she was. "Outspoken comes in handy," he said.

He unhooked her bra and pushed it off her shoulders, then she moved out of his way and yanked his underwear down, his cock springing up.

"Oh yeah. More there than I thought too. Lucky me."

He couldn't even comment because her hand wrapped around him and started to stroke. "Yeah, no."

She laughed. "What's wrong?"

"Lose the underwear yourself. It's only fair."

"I like to be fair," she said, standing up and dropping them down.

He reached for the condom and got ready fast, having a feeling she wasn't going to let him play like he wanted.

And he was right when she straddled his hips, lined up and then dropped right down on top of him.

She was tight and wet and squeezing him like a fist, then she was moving up and dropping back.

"Slow down," he said.

"Nope. Sometimes fast wins in the end. This is one of those times."

She leaned forward, her breasts dangling in his face, and he did the only thing he could do. He opened his mouth and pulled a nipple in and started to suck.

Then he nibbled and bit her when she started to ride him faster. Harder.

His hips were lifting up and matching her.

He went to put his hands on her breasts, but she grabbed his wrists and slapped them down on the bed over his head. "Nope. I'm taking control," she said. "Unless you've got a problem with it."

"Shit," he said. "No problem. I just don't know how long I can last."

"You'll last long enough," she said. "Because I'm almost there."

"Get there faster," he said.

"Bite me again," she said.

He knew what she was saying and moved his head to get her nipple, pulled it in and bit it gently like last time. He felt her flex around him so he did it again until she lifted up and arched her back and started to ride him so fast he was almost afraid he was going to pop out of her and she'd miss on the way back down and hurt them both.

But it didn't happen because she started to shout out his name, her muscles pulsing all around him, then she collapsed down as he continued to slam up into her until every part of him felt empty.

She was breathing heavily on his chest until he started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"My generator just went off."

"The lights are still on."

"Because the power is back. It switches over on its own. Maybe we generated enough power in the house ourselves."

"Damn," she said. "I hope I don't have to do that again if it goes out. The next one you get to do all the work."

He rolled her fast and then got up. He had to take care of the condom anyway. "Gladly," he said, leaning down to kiss her, and then walked into the bathroom.

"Colt."

"Yes," he said, turning to look at her.

"Nice ass."

He burst out laughing. Yeah, outspoken had its benefits.

UNTIL NIKKI

“**H**ow much damage was around your place?”
Colt looked over to see Ryan standing in the doorway to his office and stopped what he was doing to talk with his boss.

“I didn’t see anything around my area. Driving in, there were tree limbs all over the place on the side of the road but not much more. Seems like most have their power back at this point.”

He’d been checking and noticed that Nikki’s came back on about an hour ago. She’d be happy he was sure. Him, not so much.

Though last night he was thrilled.

The last thing he expected was for her to all but attack him like that. Not that he was complaining because he sure the hell wasn’t.

She was bold and outspoken like she’d been so many times. And she was a little wildcat in the bedroom.

She was one complex woman that he was trying to figure out. He wasn’t used to that and it was making his head spin more than a character in *The Exorcist*.

“We were fine at our place. Didn’t even lose power, but the office was down, as you know, and there was no use having people come in. Couldn’t even access the network so

I did what I could but enjoyed the two days with Kaitlin. We don't get that often."

"Nate wasn't home with you?" he asked of Ryan's youngest. The twins would have been in school.

"Daycare," Ryan said, smirking. "Why not? It was like a little honeymoon of sorts since Kaitlin's office was down too."

Ryan was known to be one of the biggest playboys in the area in his day. Everyone was shocked when he settled down and got married. His parents were more stunned though when Ryan ended up marrying their best friend's youngest daughter.

Kaitlin Harper was the baby of the family with three older brothers. Just like Alexa, now that he thought of it. Kaitlin's father owned Harper Investments where Kaitlin worked side by side with her father.

Then the kids came along and Ryan was one changed man completely in love with his wife.

Was Colt jealous? Yeah, he kind of was.

He started to feel that way when his younger brother, Jake, found Rachel. But Jake had had a hard couple of years and they were all worried about him after he lost his best friend in war. Jake's happiness just made up for it.

Then Grey took the plunge when he was set up on a blind date with Sierra by Ryan's best friend Jack Reynolds' wife, Cori, who worked with Sierra.

His two brothers were down and he was starting to feel the sting of his skin changing into the Hulk, but not enough to rip his shirt off.

Then Alexa met Colin and now he was the last one standing.

Until Nikki.

Now why in the world was he thinking of love and marriage and ever after with a woman who couldn't even stand his guts months ago?

Just because he had her in his bed last night and planned on it again very soon didn't mean there was anything long term in their future.

He wasn't stupid enough to bring it up, let alone even think of it. Someone like Nikki had to be handled gently, he knew.

"I probably would have done the same thing in your shoes," he said.

"So the pub fared well?" Ryan asked. "Still shocked that you'd gone through with it. How are things going with Nikki?"

Ryan had told him weeks ago to keep him posted after he'd overheard the conversation where he was trying to get Nikki out to dinner to apologize. He hadn't filled Ryan in. Didn't feel the need to when he had no idea what was going on.

Then when he started the paperwork for the partnership, Ryan had just laughed over it and said even he had never gone that far to get a woman.

Colt knew it was in jest, but was that what everyone really thought of him? That he was desperate enough to drop down that kind of money to win over Nikki?

No. That had nothing to do with it. It was more that maybe he did need to know he did everything he could to sleep well at night when he was starting to hate everything he stood for.

"They are going good," he said. "I had the generator at the house. She had no power."

"Oh," Ryan said. "So the 'why don't you stay with me so you aren't cold at night?' trick?"

He laughed. "Whatever works. But I offered it to Stan too."

"Dude," Ryan said. "You can't get anywhere with her father in the house."

"No shit. But Stan turned down the offer. He pushed Nikki to take it though."

"Interesting. Sounds like the guy likes you not just as a business partner but to be spending time with his daughter. Or doesn't he know the kind of time you two are spending together?"

"He knows. I mean he knows we've gone out a few times and that it's not just business. I don't think he knows anything else, but the guy isn't stupid."

"No, he's not. And I can tell you there is no way I would push Harper to spend the night at any man's house that wasn't her husband. And she isn't allowed to even consider kissing a man until she's twenty-five. She can hold hands at twenty."

He shook his head figuring Ryan was joking but then realized the guy was big and intimidating, not just in the courtroom, but in life. If it wasn't for the fact that his wife and daughter had him wrapped around their fingers, he might feel bad for any guy that got near Harper Mathews many, many years from now.

Then he wondered if Stan was like that with Nikki.

Stan Brewster was a big brute of a man. A strong fireman. Lots of "brothers" in the station by his side. Though Nikki had said it was just the two of them for years, he didn't believe it.

No, he had a feeling there had been a lot of men watching out for Nikki in her life. And now he wondered if that was her way of pushing men away. Or being so loud and in your face with them to see if they could handle her?

Again, thoughts that had no business being in his mind.

"I'm going to hold you to those words when she is fourteen and wants a boy to take her to her first dance."

Ryan shuddered. "You're still new here, you know, I can give you some shit cases."

"You wouldn't," Colt said. "You don't even have any shit cases."

"Thankfully," Ryan said. "So the pub itself is doing okay?"

"It's doing great," he said. "The first few weeks it was open they said it was the best business ever. They worried it'd slow down and it might, but then when the power went out they were running those specials for two nights and it was nuts. Shit, I'm glad I never worked in fast food. I wouldn't have lasted a day. I barely could handle the two nights I put in there for three hours."

"You were working?" Ryan asked.

"Of course. I couldn't leave them hanging. They had those pickup specials for three hours and Nikki cashed people out while I was in the kitchen assembling each order."

"Cooking?" Ryan asked. "I thought you didn't cook."

"I don't. The food was made and I was putting them in containers and packing it up for Nikki to come in and get them as the customers came. As much as they did well, I'm glad I don't have to do that again."

"It sounds like it's all working out," Ryan said.

"It's getting there."

"Good. The reason I came in is I've got an interesting case for you."

"Now you're talking my language." He was used to working on multiple cases at once, and he was, but nothing big. He was hoping this one would be more challenging.

Ryan got comfortable in his chair. "So I took a call about an hour ago from some old neighbors of my parents. Their son rear-ended someone three nights ago going home from college. It was eight at night, dark out and he didn't see the car in front of him. He insists there were no lights on the car at all, no brake lights either."

"Wouldn't the police have been able to tell that?"

"By time the police came the lights were on, but Michael —the client's son—didn't remember when they started to work. He swears they were off and that he never saw the car. He literally was driving and ran right into it. Then the car behind him ran into him. The woman was pregnant and

she went into labor. She's fine, the baby is fine. But the kid is shaken up because the woman he hit needed an ambulance. Said her neck hurt and she couldn't walk without limping, it just hurt too bad."

"How fast was Michael going?"

"Under forty, he said. Or at least what the police report says. It was a residential area."

"So if the car ahead of him was moving too it wouldn't be a lot of damage. Or was it stopped in the middle of the road? Or coasting slowly? The car was running and not parked? No stoplights or signs?"

"That's the funny part. There is a lot of damage as if the car was just stopped in the middle of the road. Or possibly coming to a stop with no stop sign in sight," Ryan said.

"Like bait?" Colt said.

"That's my bet. I know these people. They are good people and not the type to make things up or lie. They are concerned this is going to ruin Michael's life. It'd go on his driving record and he's going for criminal justice. He wants to be a trooper."

"Oh man. Marks against him if he is sued. That's the problem, isn't it?"

"Yep. Another funny thing. It's even in the police report, which will help Michael. The woman said she was out on workers comp with a knee injury and it was getting better and now it's worse."

"Career milker of the system by the sounds of it," he said.

Ryan smirked. "They are everywhere. She said it was her right leg. But she was favoring her left. The trooper that answered the call thought it was odd and even asked her twice which leg to see if she'd catch herself or change her story and she didn't. Said it was her right leg but was favoring her left."

"Interesting."

"Even more interesting, guess who she retained as her lawyer?" Ryan asked.

"Do I even want to know?"

"Janet Miller."

"Shit," Colt said. "And you're giving this one to me, right? Tell me you are."

"I'll send over all the files when I'm back to my office and you can reach out to Michael and his parents. I figured there was no one better at this point."

"No one at all," he said, preparing to do everything he could to nail Janet's ass to the wall. He knew her type of client. He knew them well, since he had to partake in it. And because of that, he knew all the inside people they employed to find out the dirt too.

STOP CASTING BLAME

“Is your power back yet?”

Nikki looked over at Nora, another math teacher at the high school that walked into her room. It was lunchtime and teachers often visited with one another to talk unless a student came in for help. Since the lunch period just started she had some time to eat.

“I just looked and saw it came back on. Not sure when, but it’s there, thank God.”

“Have you been staying there or your Dad’s house?” Nora asked, pulling up a chair and sitting on the side of Nikki’s desk and taking her sandwich out of her lunch bag.

Nikki did the same, pulling out some leftover salad and bread from dinner last night at Colt’s. They didn’t eat everything he’d brought home. They didn’t have time.

They’d both showered and went downstairs for food and before either of them was halfway through their spaghetti, she all but attacked him.

He wasn’t fighting her off. Nope. He was picking her up and bringing her to his room where she had her way with him.

Then after they finished up their plate of spaghetti and meatballs, he had his way with her.

It was over an hour later before she felt she had the energy to move off his bed and suggest they go clean up the food left on the counter.

The salad hadn't been touched and she said she'd bring it today for lunch so it didn't go to waste. No reason to buy cafeteria food two days in a row. It seemed to make Colt happy that she was putting a lunch together.

It was hard for her not to laugh over it too.

Yeah, she was struggling to figure him out and she wasn't used to that.

Maybe it had to do with the way they met and she was having a hard time pushing that from her mind and focusing on the guy he was at the core rather than her opinion months ago.

The guy she was dating and was a business partner with her father.

Not the lawyer that caused her father to lose his business months ago.

No, no. She had to stop casting blame. Maybe her father was to blame too for dragging it all out. Maybe if he'd hired a lawyer in the beginning it would have been over with sooner and the outcome would have been different.

Or maybe not and she couldn't go back in time and ask about what ifs either.

"My father didn't have power either. He spent most of his time at the pub and then he went home when it closed, going to bed anyway. I stayed with a friend."

That was better than saying she stayed with a man. There'd be too many questions that she didn't have a lot of answers for.

"At least it's over with. We didn't have much damage here."

"No damage around my area that I could see. I ran home after work yesterday to get some more clothes before I went into the pub and didn't see anything but tree limbs down."

"How are things going there? A couple of us were thinking of stopping in this weekend for dinner and a drink. Are you working?"

"I work most weekends," she said, knowing that she missed out on being single with friends for years. Rather than go out and have fun, she was serving those doing that.

Tonight and this weekend would be no different. She was going in right after work and then would work Saturday until midnight, Sunday until five. She couldn't do closing, as she'd have assignments to get ready and papers to grade. She wouldn't have worked as much as she had this week if her father didn't need the help.

It was totally worth it though. Not just the amount of revenue that the pub took in in those two days, but the tips that were given for her handing and cashing out orders.

Hell, Colt worked harder than her in the kitchen assembling everything. Poor guy looked like a wilted piece of grass by the end of the night.

He perked right up like her after that shower though. And it was nice to be in bed sleeping by nine rather than almost midnight on Wednesday when they'd left the pub, gotten her clothes, and then got settled into his house.

His house that was nicer than anything else she'd ever been in before.

Sure, it was older on the outside, but the inside was nice and modern and didn't reflect a bachelor lived there.

She'd know. She'd been with enough guys that their apartments were all filled with beat up furniture, stains and messes on the counters. No one was a slob as much as they didn't take care with things or decorate, let alone buy new stuff, have generators or home gyms.

Not Colt. His decor was simple, but it was there. There were art pieces on the walls, just not bold bright ones like she had.

His spare bedroom that she stayed in the first night was comfortable, and if she didn't have the sexy guy that was

down the hall in another bed on her mind, she might have slept well.

Last night, she'd stayed in his room with him and slept like a baby.

She wasn't sure if it was because she was exhausted or she had the nice warm body of Colt Baxter pressing against her back.

He liked to spoon. She didn't take him for that.

But she realized she didn't take him for a lot of things and she had to stop judging so much.

"Then you'll be on if we come down tomorrow night?" Nora said.

"I will be," she said, then heard her phone go off and pulled it out of the drawer to look. It was from Colt telling her her power was back if she didn't know.

She typed back she did and would get her stuff from his place this weekend.

He told her not to worry and she stopped the conversation because a student walked into the room and she had to put them first when she was here.



COLT THREW his phone back on his desk.

As much as he wanted Nikki at his place again tonight, he knew the time was up. Her power was back and the least he could do was let her know, but he hadn't wanted to text her when she'd be teaching and he remembered she'd commented on her lunch hour before.

The last thing he wanted was her to pick her stuff up but knew that was happening too. He'd told her not to worry and he could see she stopped typing and wasn't sure why.

Then he told himself to stop analyzing every little thing. She could have been busy and just stopped to reply back to him.

She was working tonight, tomorrow and Sunday. She was going to go home after, that was a given, and he had to figure out his next move and when he could get her back at his place.

Until then, he should just focus on his job and not the sexy brunette that gave him one hell of a ride last night.

When his phone rang, he reached over to get it, thinking it might be Nikki, but he saw it was his mother.

"Hey, Mom."

"Colt. Did you get your power back yet?"

"Last night," he said. "Did Grey get his back yet?"

"He got it sometime yesterday when he was at work. How did the pub make out? I saw the promos you had going there. Good touch."

"They did well. Made a bunch of money and hopefully got a lot of new clients in the process. The food is out of this world."

"Maybe doing pickup dinner specials like that should be an ongoing thing?" his mother asked. "I can't tell you how nice that would have been when I was getting out of work and had to feed you all."

"I thought of it too, but it's not my place to suggest it."

"You have some ownership," his mother said.

"Silent partner," he corrected. "I'm helping them out if they need it, like they did the last two nights, but I'm getting a heavier workload now and need to put my focus back on that."

"Are you happy there?" his mother asked.

"You've already asked me that. Anywhere other than where I was would be an improvement."

His mother always wanted to know her kids were happy. Even though he liked to argue and get the last word in, he'd like to think he'd gotten that from his mother.

That he cared about others and was the homemaker that Nikki accused him of being.

"Maybe not to your wallet," his mother said.

"It's all good and will pick up. Money isn't an issue and hasn't been in many years."

His parents had paid for his first four years of college, just like they did Grey and Alexa. Jake went in the service and got his schooling that way. But the rest of them had to pay for their additional education after those four years. It'd been totally worth it to him and when he graduated and got his first job—hired by Janet, now that he thought of it—he'd been thrilled.

He didn't want to live home for long, so he moved in with Grey and they split the costs, helping each other out.

When that first big check came in for a case, he was all but drooling over the payday.

Janet had him working with her over a car accident. A drunk driver ran a light and hit a family of four. One kid broke his leg and would need multiple surgeries. He was a star athlete and might not play baseball again. He was actually being scouted at the time and that all stopped.

He'd felt bad for the kid and the family. That his dream had been taken away by some idiot and they'd been able to win a nice settlement for the family and the kid because they went to court rather than settling.

It was a feel good story for him that gave him his first taste of helping someone out.

He'd banked that money and then went back to doing divorces and custody battles.

The next big case on his own, Janet had told him he had what it took, and she'd just oversee it. An employee got hurt at work and hadn't wanted to sue, but had legitimate injuries causing him to not be able to work for months, then when their FMLA ran out, he was replaced.

Colt was pissed off when his client came in upset and asked what his options were. They'd ended up settling out of court rather quickly, just a few months, because his client didn't want it long and drawn out.

Didn't matter. That was a big settlement and a massive chunk of money that allowed him to start looking for his house with a nice down payment.

"I know, Colt," his mother said. "I think you were almost dragged along and primed for the taste of money. They had you doing so much good and then it changed. Do you know why?"

He didn't often talk to his parents about details, but they knew enough. "I'm sure I knew when it changed, but it doesn't matter. It's in my past. If I don't get a partnership, I don't care. I just want to go back to doing what is right."

"And you will. Speaking of doing what is right. How are things with Nikki?"

"I already told you they were doing good with the power outage," he said.

"No. Not the pub. Nikki. Stan's daughter."

He was wondering if his brothers threw him under the bus. "What are you talking about?"

"If you want to play dumb that is fine, but we could all see you had your eyes on her."

He sighed. "I do. I have. And no, that isn't why I put money into the pub."

"Of course it wasn't," his mother said. "No one would accuse you of that. Well, maybe your brothers, but they'd be joking."

"Would they be?" he asked, laughing.

"Grey would be, but maybe not Jake. Anyway, anything to report there?"

"We've got the start of something, but I'm not sure what. That is all I'm saying."

"I suppose that will have to be enough for now," his mother said.

"Yes, it will."

WE ARE AWESOME

“What a week it's been," Nikki's father said to her on Sunday when she was finishing up her shift.

There were still several tables with people at them and a few at the bar with football playing on the TV. She was going to leave at five, but they'd gotten a rush and she couldn't leave Michele on her own, so she took a few extra tables and now that they were gone, she could head out.

It wasn't even seven yet and she had plenty of time to get work done for tomorrow. She'd done some on Saturday before work and today too.

"Tell me about it. My pockets are nice and flush so that is a good thing." She turned and looked at her father's tip jar and saw it was stuffed too. "The register is holding up?"

"Doing great," her father said. They were off to the side while her father was stocking glasses. "Best week we've ever had. I feel bad that it seems we took advantage of other people's misfortune though."

"No one told them they had to buy food off of us. There were grocery stores open and other restaurants. We can't help it if we are awesome and thought of the specials."

"Nope, we can't," her father said, agreeing with a massive smile on his face. "And I appreciate you putting the

time in when you don't usually during the week. I'm sure you've got a lot of catching up to do and could have been out of sorts not being in your own bed too."

She felt her face flush. Her father wouldn't know whose bed she was in, but he wasn't stupid.

She started to think of it more and wondered if maybe he was pushing her and Colt together but hadn't wanted to ask. That was a big old can of worms and there were no fishing poles in sight to drown them.

"I'm getting back to it, but it will be nice to have the rest of the week off and come back for Friday and the weekend."

"You can take the time off if you need it," her father said. "Michele has things covered and so does Jen. You did a good job with her. She picked up fast and moves as efficiently as you."

"She was a good find. I'm glad Michele suggested her. I guess she's the younger sister of a friend of Michele's who was looking for some money while in college. Nights work for her since she is in school days."

"Well, I don't want her overdoing it if she has schoolwork," her father said.

"I already talked to her about it. I told her the same when I did the schedule for next week," she told her father.

Since they were closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, it worked out to give everyone a break. Michele worked the other five days full time and Nikki and Jen filled in. She knew she was going to have to find someone else soon too because she needed to cut back a little and Jen's schedule could change next semester.

But with the pub just getting back on its feet, not having a lot of staff had helped.

"That's good. I was thinking about opening on Tuesdays soon. What do you think?"

"Do you want to rush it? It hasn't been that long."

"It's so funny that you've always been a risk taker in life, but you're not now," her father said. "Hang on."

He moved away to fill another drink order and she finished stacking the glasses for him and grabbed her purse. She wanted to get home and she knew Colt wanted to talk too. They hadn't seen each other all weekend and she felt bad about that, but he knew she was working.

This was her life and he'd have to get used to it. Even if she cut back her hours, she wouldn't leave her father high and dry so she could go out with a guy.

Family came first. It always would.

"If there isn't anything else you need, I'll head out now," she said.

"Just one thing, but I can talk to you tomorrow about it if you want."

"No, go ahead. What is it?"

"I've had a lot of people ask if we were going to do those specials again. I was thinking maybe we could during the week when it's not as busy. Friday through Sunday it wouldn't work. But Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday when it's slower during the week. What do you think? Scott and Logan were game for it and coming up with different ideas."

"It's your business, Dad," she said. "I think it's a great idea if you can handle it."

"I can handle it. I won't ask you to come in. We'd only do it for that three-hour window again. Four to seven and we'll limit the number of meals we can do, but I think it will be fine. I think it'd be a nice boost to add to Tuesday opening it back up that day."

"Then I say go for it. If you're making money and it's not taxing anyway, the more exposure the better."

"That's my girl," he said, leaning down to give her a kiss on the cheek.

She turned and waved to some people at the bar she knew, grabbed the takeout container of a club sandwich and fries, then left and got in her car to go home.

Her plan was to sit down and stuff her face, grateful that she got her laundry done this morning. It had piled up on her with the power being out and then not being around. That was one of the drawbacks to renting an apartment...not having a washer and dryer in her place.

Once she was at her little table with her food in front of her, she sent off a text to Colt to see if he could talk. She wasn't often someone that liked to talk on the phone, but in this case it was easier than texting.

When her phone rang, she grabbed her earbuds and put them in and continued to eat. "Hey," she said around a mouthful. "Sorry, but I'm starving."

"No problem. Did you just get home? I thought you were done at five today."

She wanted to grind her teeth. "I didn't know I had to report my schedule to you."

He laughed on the other end. "Not at all. Just a question. Us lawyers, we are known for asking them."

There she was again, getting annoyed for no reason. "I was going to leave at five, but they got a rush and I didn't want to leave Michele on her own so I took a few more tables. It's all good. I grabbed a club sandwich for dinner with fries."

"That's better than what I had."

"What did you make?" she asked.

"Grilled cheese. My culinary talents are better suited for grilling at times. It seems I do a lot of eggs, grilled cheese, and pizza when I'm on my own."

"Maybe I'll cook for you one night if you want," she said. "I'm off from the pub until next Friday."

"Really?" he asked. "That would be nice. You name the night and I'll make it happen."

She didn't want to jump and say tomorrow. That would sound almost too desperate even for her. "How about Tuesday?" she asked.

"Works for me. And maybe you could stay the night," he slipped in there.

"That had kind of been my plan too."

"I like when we are thinking the same. It doesn't seem to happen often," he said.

"We were on the same wavelength Thursday night."

"We were. I'm hoping to get there again."

"Most definitely," she said.

"So how was the pub this weekend? Busy?" he asked.

She was surprised he hadn't stopped down and then had to tell herself she would have been annoyed if he had. He said he was going to be a silent partner and that meant letting her father do what he wanted.

"It was. As my father said when I was leaving, it might have been the best week he's ever had. I know we won't be like that all the time and it'd be nice to not have it all in a few days, but he's happy and that is all that matters."

"It is. I'm glad for that. He might even consider opening on Tuesdays at some point if it keeps up."

And there she went grinding her teeth. "My father can figure it out."

There was silence on the other end. "I know he can. It was just words. Conversation more than anything. Not a suggestion or a request. I put in two days' worth of time there and that is enough to last me for the year."

She laughed. "Too much for you?"

"Enough," he said. "I've got another career and am thankful for it and it's picking up. I need to put my time and energy into that. I'm glad I could help out this week and I'll do it if it's needed, but it can't be a habit."

She sighed. She knew he'd say that and deep down it was the way it had to be.

And she knew he'd be there if she or her father needed it too and he could make it happen.

He had done his part and brought in a lot of people already by word of mouth.

"I know. I told my father I had to cut back too. I only ever did weekends unless he was down staff. My other job has to come first and he understands that. But I don't want him to struggle either."

"I don't think he is," Colt said.

"No. And he said tonight that he is thinking of opening on Tuesdays too. I'm sure he might tell you at some point. His other thought was he wanted to do those specials during the week. Not Friday or the weekends, but he had some customers asking and he thought it worked out well. Scott and Logan are all over it too."

"I think that's great," he said. "My mother actually mentioned that to me a few days ago. That she would have totally done that during the week to get dinner on the table."

He didn't tell her that, which meant that he was stepping back like he'd said. She had to remember that when he brought things up. She had to stop being so defensive, but lifelong habits were so hard to break.

"That's my father's thought. He'll work it out with Scott and Logan and I'll stay out of it until it's ready to go and then make sure the girls are trained the way he wants."

"You guys have a good system," Colt said.

"We do. We like it too."

"I have no plans on changing that," he said.

"I know. It's just odd."

"What is?"

"Having someone else that has the right to give an opinion. You've got more right than me."

"But I'm not going to do it much. As I said, I've got too much going on. A new case landed on my desk and I need to focus on that."

"Can you talk about your work?" she asked.

"Not really," he said, laughing. "But I'll make sure to have time for you on Tuesday."

"Then I can't ask for anything more, can I?"

"I suppose not," he said, but she heard his voice drop and wondered what that was about.

IF YOU MEAN IT

Colt had tried not to get annoyed when Nikki had said she supposed there wasn't anything more she could ask for.

She could ask for a lot more if she wanted to. Or at least from him. But he had a feeling her pride wouldn't allow her to do much in the way of asking a man for anything.

He'd just have to deal with it in the future.

As he'd told his mother, they had the start of something and he had no clue what or where it was going. For him that was saying a lot.

Maybe that had been his problem for years. He always had an idea of what his life would be like and it didn't turn out that way. But he took a step and made a change after hesitating for so long.

Fear of starting over had been a huge motivator for staying in place.

But hating himself and what he was beginning to stand for overrode that.

Now it was time to take another step.

On Tuesday night he heard the doorbell go off and moved to the front door. "Why are you ringing the bell?" he asked Nikki when he pulled the door open and saw her

standing there with her hands full of bags. "Here, let me take them."

"I've got it," she said, moving past him.

He didn't care and took them out of her arms. She could just get over not wanting someone to do something as simple as carrying a damn bag for her.

"Now I've got them," he said.

She laughed at him and he had to take a deep breath. He was getting worked up for no reason when he normally didn't.

"I rang the bell because, as I said last time, the door could have been locked and it's not like it's my house."

He rolled his eyes. "I think we are beyond you ringing a bell after what we did on my bed last week."

"Five long days ago," she said, grinning at him. "I've got ground beef and thought I'd make burgers. We need the protein for the night."

She sure knew how to put him in a better mood. "Is that so?"

"It is," she said. "I figured it'd be a fast meal. I'll throw some baked beans in the oven if that is okay and then put together a salad since I know you'll eat one."

"Baked beans?" he asked, laughing. "And you're spending the night. Lovely."

She burst out laughing. "Come on, Colt. Everyone farts. Guys love doing that and showing off."

"Not in front of a woman they want to impress or are just getting to know."

"You've impressed me and I'd like to think we know each other well. So if you fart, then you fart. Just don't hold my head under the covers."

"Really?" he said. "Someone did that to you?" Sure, guys did it all the time. Or he did with his brothers, but he would never do that to a woman.

She shrugged. "It's happened. Doesn't matter. We all fart and poop and burp. It's life."

"How about you come give me a hug and a kiss since you pointed out it's been five long days?" he said. "And we can stop talking about this before I start to laugh even more."

"I can do that," she said, turning from taking the food out of the bags.

"I've missed you," he said. "Or aren't I allowed to say that?"

"You can say it if you mean it."

"Why wouldn't I mean it?" he asked, wondering what was going through her head.

"No reason. Just a statement. You can say anything you want if you mean it. I want you to feel that way, I guess."

Which told him more than he would have expected alone.

"Can I help you with anything?" he asked. "I do appreciate you coming here to cook after working all week at the pub and school. It's like you don't get a day off."

"I'm young yet. Not a big deal. How about you? I know we didn't talk much this weekend or even much more than some texts the past few days."

"Just busy with work. Got a new case I'm diving into that is going to take some of my attention."

"That's great. Hope it's something you want to do this time," she said.

He wouldn't bore her with it.

He'd learned his lesson years ago when it came to work and the time he spent at it.

Didn't his last relationship end suddenly because he couldn't take the crap anymore? That Lila was all about dating a lawyer and loving his job and what he could give her, but she hated that he worked so much.

She liked it when he took his wallet out but no other time.

Nikki couldn't stand when he wanted to do something for her and here he was dying to. She threw a fit if he wanted to carry the damn grocery bags in.

"Oh, I'm going to enjoy this case. Right up my alley," he said to her.

"Good," she said. "I'm happy for you."

"You are?" he asked.

She was opening up cabinets. "Of course I am. We should all enjoy our jobs. Do you have any spices? If not, just salt and pepper will do."

He moved over and opened another cabinet and she walked behind him to look, grabbed a few blends that he'd bought to put on meat for the grill and then went to mix the ground beef and form patties.

"We should be happy. Walking out the door of my last place was enough to feel the weight lifted off my shoulders. Having you here is helping a lot. Makes me feel like I'm doing some good again."

She turned and looked at him, leaning on the counter. "You'll have to explain that to me. It sounds like I'm here to make you feel better rather than wanting me for any other reason. I better damn well not be a conscience lifter for you."

"Damn, you can flip on a switch," he said. "No, that isn't what I meant."

He moved and got a pan for her for the burgers and put it down, then turned the oven on to warm up for the beans. He needed to gather his thoughts with the way the two of them were going at it.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm still a little raw."

"I get it. I was talking to my mother the other day and she brought up my last job. She pointed out that when I started there I got all these cases that made me feel good. I was going for the underdog and I was willing and I was making a lot of money."

"Priming you to get a taste for it?" she asked.

"Exactly the words my mother used. They knew the type of person I was and used that to their advantage. It was

years before they started to shift me, hanging shit over my head that a partner brought in money at any cost.”

“The cost being your ethics and moral standards?” she asked.

Nikki got him when so many other women in his past didn’t. Too bad they went for each other’s throats so much before really comprehending what the other truly meant.

“Yes. I put a lot of time into my job. Enough that some of my past relationships failed. They liked what I could give them, but they hated the time it took away from them.”

“So how many relationships have you had?” she asked.

He put the beans in a casserole dish and slid them in the oven to heat up, Nikki putting the burgers in a pan. He grabbed another bowl for her for the salad and then took a knife out and helped her get it ready.

“A few. Nothing more than a year or so. The last one was about eight months. I was working a big case. It was taking my focus and attention off of Lila.”

She snickered. “Her name alone sounds high maintenance.”

“She was that. A Daddy’s girl and used to getting what she wanted and when. Anyway, what she didn’t like was that I was not only putting a lot of time in on my job, but it was with one of the partners that was a woman.”

“That bitch that put you on my father’s case?” she asked.

He laughed. “That’s the one.”

“Did you have something going with her?” Nikki asked. “Just curious. What you’ve done in your past isn’t anything I can really get mad about.”

“That’s funny,” he said. “I get the feeling you’d hold my past over my head. Isn’t that how you judged me?”

Her face turned red and he knew he hit a nerve. “You’re not going to let me forget it, are you?”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t bring it up, but it fit into this conversation.”

"I had that coming. I've learned in life that most times I have things coming to me. My father has told me enough times."

He felt bad about that. "You aren't a bad person."

"Nope, I'm not. But I have a temper and I've said that before. I jump the gun and go for the negative over the positive with someone."

"Why is that?" he asked. "If you are asking about my past, I can ask about yours."

"You can. I guess I'm just used to being independent. My father was protective but not so much I rebelled more than the average teen. We didn't have a ton growing up being in a single parent household, but we had a roof over our heads and I was cared for. I mean I didn't want for much, but I sure the hell didn't have what a lot of other kids did. Not material things."

"There were four of us," he said. "I'm very thankful my parents paid for the first four years of our schooling, but the rest was on us. My brothers and I shared a car. We didn't get our own. When Grey went to college, I got it, then when I went, Jake got it. We had to work it out and fight a lot when we were home over the summer."

"My father did get me a beat-up used vehicle, but I was thankful for it so I could get a job."

"We all had jobs too. Most times my parents went without a car on the weekends or were shuffling us around to our jobs. Like you, our family made it work."

"I know I give you crap about having more than me. Even about your job, but I know deep down you're a great guy."

"Gee, thanks. It seems like it pained you to say that."

She moved into his arms. "It didn't pain me but took a lot to admit it. I don't get attached to a lot of people. Not even people I date."

"Because you're afraid of being left?" he asked. Could she have PTSD from her mother's death? He was smart

enough to not even bring that up though.

"Maybe. I've said before I don't have the best taste in men."

"Present company excluded," he said.

"Sure," she said, giving him a kiss.

He saw the grin and didn't take offense to that. "You came in with food bags, but not overnight clothes? I thought you were staying."

"I am. They are in my car. I could only carry so many things in at once."

"Because you won't ask for help," he said.

"Nope and you aren't going to get me to change that."

AS INDEPENDENT AS YOU

When Nikki was cleaning up dinner, she played back their conversation in her head.

She wasn't sure why Colt was so dead set on wanting to help her. She'd been on her own for years. Her father was a great guy. He loved her. He cared for her. But he didn't mother her.

Maybe that was part of the problem. She'd never had a mother.

She had grandmothers and they were there for her and filled voids, but it wasn't the same.

She'd never had a guy want to do much for her either. Sure, some helped out or they went places and did things. They exchanged gifts. But if she needed something in life, she did it on her own.

She didn't even ask her father because she knew he had enough weight on his shoulders in life. And when he decided to open his pub years ago, she worked right alongside of him without him asking.

Guess she got that stubbornness from him.

But now she had this great guy that wanted to do things for her without her asking. Was it because he was used to having women like that? Or maybe it made him feel better?

She wanted to ask and was trying to find a way to do it. Might as well go all in.

"Can I asked you something?" she asked.

"Always."

"Are you used to doing things for people or is it just me?"

He frowned. "Because I mentioned Lila being high maintenance and wanting time and things from me?"

"I guess. I'm just curious about the type of woman you normally dated."

"Definitely not someone as independent as you," he said, tweaking her nose.

"I figured. I suppose that is some of why I struggle so much."

"Don't. Part of wanting to do those things is it's in my nature. I've thought of that in the past too. I'm like my mom in that sense. Not a mother," he said firmly.

She laughed at him. "I get it. It's in some men's nature."

"Your father is like that."

"Not really. I mean he's protective and that is different than asking if I needed lunch for the day."

"Your father didn't make your lunch for you?"

"No. I bought lunch because it was one less thing for him to have to worry about. He made sure I had the money for it, but there were no special lunches or notes in a brown bag."

Some kids at school got them and maybe she was jealous, but she knew the type of man her father was and loved him for it. She had no memories telling her if her mother was maternal or not. She was too young to know that. Or remember it.

"I'm not sure my mother did that to us," he said, laughing.

"Probably not. I'm just saying there were no shopping days or dresses or whatever. My father would give me money to go do it or my grandmother would. Again, not going without."

"But not experiencing that bond of someone doing those things for you or with you. It makes sense now."

"What makes sense?"

"You need to be mothered. Someone has to force it on you because you've never had it. If you got it, you wouldn't have a stick stuck up your butt about little gestures anymore."

She opened her mouth and then closed it again. "No clue, but I'm beyond the mothering stage. And I'm over talking about this. If there is something you want to do for me, I can name it."

"Please do," he said once he shut the dishwasher and turned it on. "After this dinner it's the least I can do."

"You can take me upstairs and fuck me hard."

"Damn," he said. "Can I tell you that anyone who complains about you being bold hasn't seen this side of you? I love it."

She laughed. "I figured you would. So, are you going to do that for me?"

"Shit yeah," he said.

"And no reason to carry me. I can walk just fine."

"But it was fun feeling your legs around me last time."

"We've got plenty of time for more of that tonight," she said.

When they got to his room, she started to take her clothes off. "What's your hurry?"

"It's been five days," she reminded him. "Maybe I just want it more than you."

"Not possible," he said quietly and she had to remind herself there was a part of him she was still trying to grasp. She'd have to put those thoughts on the backburner though for now.

She continued to remove her clothes and then lifted her eyes at him to do the same. He let out an exaggerated sigh and started to undress and then got a condom.

"Where do you want me?" she asked, strutting around. Might as well put on a little show for him.

"You're one wicked woman, but if this is about what I want or what you want me to do, then you can get on your hands and knees."

She grinned. "Is that so?"

He moved toward her, picked her up and put her there. "Something tells me you like it when you're pushed even when you say you don't. You put up this big front, but you want to hand over the control too."

Damn him for figuring that out and for showing her he had what it took to not take her crap. For caring enough to try when others just gave up without understanding the walls she built and why. Of course she'd been seeing that all along too.

There was only so far that Colt Baxter could be pushed and she was finding that out in the best possible way.

She got on her hands and knees, her ass in the air, Colt getting behind her after she'd heard the wrapper open. "I have to say I hate that I don't get to play with you nearly as much as I'd like."

"Time for that after. We've got to get this one out of the way. It's still new to me. I want it more."

He laughed. "Like this?" he said as he slid in fast and she gasped. Oh yeah, that was exactly what she wanted.

"You know what you're doing," she said as he moved in and out. "I'm letting you run the show this time."

"Thanks for that," he said and gripped her hips, sliding in and out at a pace she wasn't sure if he could maintain, but hoped the hell he could until she got there.

She reached her hand down to touch herself, fearful he'd be done before her and she didn't want that to happen.

He leaned over her back and laughed in her ear. "I'll get you there, don't worry. Just enjoy it."

He pushed her hand out of the way and replaced it with his, then started to move it fast, stopped and did it again.

Every time she got close he stopped and she wanted to scream.

"Now you're teasing me," she said almost growling.

His hips were moving and stopping too. She thought he was doing it to make it last for him but then realized it was to work her up even more.

"You bet this sweet ass of yours I am," he said. "Tell me what you want again."

"You're doing it," she said.

He stopped moving completely, then flicked at her swollen nub. It was just enough pain to make her want it again. "That."

"With this?" he asked, slamming into her to the point she was moving up on the bed and her hands were sliding.

"Yes," she yelled.

He flicked at her a few more times and her knees almost buckled with the power of the orgasm. She was panting and moaning and it didn't seem to want to end.

And when Colt grabbed her hips and just started to pound into her, she realized she was either having the world's longest orgasm or she was coming again.

"Oh my God," she screamed.

He kept it up and her eyes were almost crossing until he grunted out and then all but collapsed on her, his heavy breathing in her ear.

"Well," he said, "did I do what you asked?"

"You sure the hell did," she said, glad that she was on her belly and he was on top of her back. Otherwise she might have wrapped her arms around him and held on more than she had any other man in her life.

DOWN ON YOURSELF

“So how are things going with you and Colt?” Nikki’s father asked Sunday before her shift started and the bar opened.

“What? Why do you ask that?”

“Come on,” her father said. “You don’t think I’m going to fall for that, do you? You’ve been dating over a month easily.”

She sighed. They had been. It’d been over a month since the storm and she’d spent the night at Colt’s house and ended up in his bed.

In that time they’d made somewhat of an actual relationship work. Maybe.

“Fine. Things are normal, I guess. We don’t see that much of each other.”

“Normal?” her father asked. “What is considered normal in this day and age with dating?”

“No clue,” she admitted. “I want to say normal for me, but I don’t even think it’s that since Colt isn’t someone that I’d normally date.”

“Why? Do you think you aren’t good enough for him or something? You better not be getting down on yourself again.”

She wasn't in the mood for a lecture. "I'm not down on myself and am not sure that I ever was."

"Please," her father said. "You'd always get quiet in school when you were bothered. Then you'd talk about other kids and what they were doing or had or where they were going with their lives. Relationships. You never said you wanted it, but I could see it in your eyes."

Was Colt right? Were a lot of her problems stemming from losing her mother at such a young age? She wasn't sure of anything anymore.

"I never thought much of things. I want to say you are thinking more of it than me."

"A parent knows their child. So, what is going on? Something has to be."

"Nothing really is. We don't see much of each other."

"So that's it?" her father asked. "Do you think he's put out because you work two jobs?"

"No. During the week he's working a lot of long days and then I'm working on the weekends. We probably both work the same amount of hours, but they aren't meshing. We have been trying to have dinner once or twice a week when I'm not working, but I wonder if that is him taking time from work when he'd rather not."

"You won't know that unless you ask," he said. "Why haven't you?"

"Because he doesn't talk about his work much."

"As I said, do you ask?"

"No. I'm not sure I want to know either, even if he could tell me."

"Do you think he's going to turn into the person you hated months ago?"

She thought of that for a few minutes and then said, "No. I'm beyond that, I think. I'd like to believe I know him well enough that I did misjudge him."

"I'm happy to hear you say that. You're finally maturing."

She wanted to narrow her eyes at him but saw the laughter in his. "Very funny," she said.

"I thought it was. So, what are you doing for Thanksgiving next week?"

She frowned. "Working here with you."

"Why aren't you spending it with Colt?"

"I'm not sure we are at that stage yet," she said. "Besides, holidays are for family and you're my only family."

"But am I really?" her father asked.

She wanted to ask him to explain that more, but Michele came in the door and she decided the conversation was done. She wasn't in the mood to let it be known she was dating someone, least of all Colt.

But the next day, she'd left school and gone to Colt's for dinner and was going to spend the night again. She only had two more days of work this week before the holiday weekend and maybe she should ask what his plans were.

"Are you spending the holiday with your parents?"

"I am," he said. "I was going to bring it up to you and see if you wanted to join me."

"I'm working with my father. I wouldn't leave him alone."

"I figured but the invitation is there. We are eating early."

"I'll be busy working on Wednesday too. Bars are normally packed before the holidays. People come home but then don't want to sit around with family too much either and go out drinking."

"I never thought of it one way or another since I was always home for the holidays. So you're working Wednesday through Sunday?" he asked.

"No. I'm taking Saturday and Sunday off. I need a break. Not sure if you've got plans or not?"

"I don't," he said, "and I'd like to spend the weekend together if you want."

"Most definitely," she said. She was sitting on his couch, his arm around her. They'd already eaten dinner and were

relaxing before they called it a night. She got thinking about her father's conversation yesterday and asked, "How are things with work? You seem busy lately."

"Asking because you're curious or not happy I'm busy and we aren't seeing each other?"

And this was why she didn't want to ask. "Curious. I'd be the last person to complain since I'm working two jobs. I just know you've got one job and are probably putting in more hours than me. I didn't know if everything was okay or if there were problems? Maybe this is the norm and I don't know that either. I wouldn't know unless I asked."

"True. I'm in the middle of a case right now. This one is personal to me so maybe it's taking up more of my time. I don't always have cases like that. I don't always have big cases either."

"Can you talk about this one? Or is that a no-no?"

"I can a little without going into details. It's a personal injury suit. I'm representing the person being sued. I'm positive this is a scam that is used a lot and have a bunch of investigators working on things."

She smiled. "Going for the little guy?"

"Most definitely."

"Redemption?" she asked.

"In more ways than one," he said.

She thought for a moment and couldn't figure out why he'd say that. "How come?"

"It's against my former boss."

"Oh," she said, smiling. "Go after that bitch."

He laughed. "I can't go after her, but I can win this and make a point with them."

"Do they know you are the other attorney? I'm not sure how it all works."

"Yes, they do. We've just had a few emails going back and forth but nothing major. They want to settle, we want to go to court. It'd cost more to go to court, but I'm sure I can win this. It just depends if my clients want to pay the fees. I

believe they do because it's their twenty-year-old son being sued. He doesn't want this mark on his license which may affect him getting into law enforcement in the future."

"Which just pisses me off even more," she said. "That someone is out for a quick buck and doesn't even think of the lives that could be changed by this. All they want is what they feel the insurance should pay out. Like we pay premiums just for that reason."

"And most people let it go, but the more they fight back the better in the long run. Anyway, no need to go into it. I've got a lot on my mind with it and that is why I'm spending so much time there. I'm sorry if you are feeling neglected."

She started to laugh. "I'm not at all."

"You don't lie very well."

She opened her mouth and closed it. "The only thing I'm missing is your body," she said turning and straddling his hips.

"That goes without saying," he said as he brought her mouth closer to his. "So am I wearing you down yet?"

There was no reason to ask what he was talking about. She knew. Colt knew more about her than anyone else ever had, even better than she knew herself at times. "Maybe you are."

"I want you to say yes and until you do, then I'm going to have to work a little harder."

"Why?" she asked. "Most men would just write it off."

"I'm not most men. I get what I want in life because I put the work in. It makes the reward all the better in the end."

"So I'm a prize now?"

"You are to me," he said, smiling.

"I want to be annoyed over this conversation, but there is a part of me that isn't."

"Because deep down you just want to be loved, Nikki. You won't admit it, at least not yet, but one day you will to me."

She didn't say those words to men. She hadn't felt it often and when she did, things didn't work out.

If she kept her heart in check enough, if she put up enough walls, then she wouldn't be hurt.

Then she would be left.

Shit! Colt was right.

STUBBORNNESS AND PRIDE

Colt was determined to knock down those barriers that Nikki had put up around herself. The ones that were double layered and protecting her heart too.

He knew enough that he couldn't say that to her though, even if he wanted to.

Even if he wanted to tell her that he was falling in love with her and had been for weeks. Maybe even from the first time she got in his face and told him what she really thought of him.

As much as she'd said she didn't need to be protected, he knew he had to.

She was protecting her heart and he had to watch out for her to get her to open up to him.

The only way to do that though was to talk to Nikki's father. At least in his mind.

So the next day when Nikki was at school, Colt left the office and drove to the pub before they opened. He hadn't been in much in the past month. Part of it had to do with him just being busy. The other part was that he said he wouldn't get involved in the everyday operations and he was sticking to it. He didn't want Nikki to think he was going back on his word.

"Hey, Colt," Stan said when he walked in the door.
"Coming in for lunch or a visit?"

"Just a chat," he said. "But I might get some lunch to go if one of the guys will do it."

"Of course. Just go on back and tell them what you want. You're good at packaging things up for takeout."

He laughed. "Yeah, I don't care for a repeat of that night. But things are going well here?"

"Real good. Go put your order in and then I'll give you an accounting of the business."

He didn't want Stan to think that was why he was here, but if the guy felt like he had to, he would. He figured out a long time ago that Nikki got her stubbornness and pride from her father.

"So how's the takeout going during the week?" he asked when he returned to the bar. He knew that they went ahead with it. Stan had called him about it and Colt had said it was a great idea and reiterated that the daily running of the bar went to Stan.

"It's great. A nice little side gig going on. I've got our hostess back now and she's the one dealing with the orders when they come in. It is worth having her on to seat people and cash out and pick up during those few hours."

"That's great. So you are running at full capacity again? Like you were before?"

"Pretty much. Revenue is great. Customers seem happy. Things ebb and flow like normal, but it's steady. I can't thank you enough. I would have never been able to get up and running again without your cash."

"Don't thank me," he said. "It was the least I could do."

"I'll make sure you get every penny of it back," Stan said.

There was no use arguing with the guy. "Don't rush on it. Get stable and steady. Start showing a profit and put it right back into the pub. That is what I want."

"Something tells me there is more that you want than an accounting of the business today?"

There was no fooling Stan and he wasn't even going to try to. "Maybe," he said, laughing. "So, Nikki..."

Stan laughed. "At least you have no problem talking to me about her. I brought you up to her the other day and she tried to play dumb that you two were dating."

Was Nikki embarrassed to be seeing him? He never got that impression before. "What did she say?"

"Not much. I asked how things were going with you two and she wanted to know what I was talking about. I told her I wasn't stupid and knew you'd been dating at least a month."

"More than that," he said. "I figured you knew. I also figured you'd let me know if you had an issue with it."

"I don't," Stan said. "Nikki is a big girl and can pick her own partners. If I think someone isn't treating her well, then they have to answer to me. But something tells me that isn't the case. That it's more like my daughter confuses you."

"That goes without saying," he said, laughing.

"She's been like that her whole life."

"She doesn't like to talk much. I try, but then we end up butting heads."

"Again, she's been like that since she was a little kid."

"So not since your wife died?" he asked. "And you can tell me to mind my own business if you want."

"I wouldn't," Stan said. "But what are you getting at? That she changed after her mother died?"

"No clue what I'm getting at. Just trying to have a better understanding of Nikki."

"Good luck there," Stan said, grinning. "Nikki was so young when my wife died. I think there were years I could barely hold it together but did it for her. I had no choice. If it wasn't for Nikki's grandparents I wouldn't have even been able to stay a fireman. The hours made it too hard. I still have regrets that I wasn't home a lot."

"Your wife wasn't around much either, right?"

"No. That's the sad part. I know Nikki doesn't remember her mother and all I can do is tell her stories. I didn't do it right away either."

"Sounds like you were just trying to put one foot in front of the other," he said.

"I was. I'm not the warmest guy in the world. I'm friendly and all, but I'm not much of a mother to Nikki. I couldn't be. I thought her grandmothers were doing it and found out they weren't. I know there were things she missed out on in life and I've lectured her before about letting it bring her down."

Interesting. "I never pictured Nikki as someone who got down about things in life like that. About something she didn't have. Or at least letting others see it."

"She wouldn't let anyone see it, but a parent knows," Stan said. "I think that is part of the reason she's still single."

"She's afraid to get close to someone and think they are going to leave her too?" Colt asked.

"Yeah. I know I can't control that or even say anything. I can only sit back and watch and make sure I'm there to catch her when she falls."

"She's said you always have been. That you've supported her with everything in life and praised her when she succeeded and picked her up when she failed."

"I have," Stan said. "That's how you learn. Have to do it yourself and figure it out."

"You do," he said. "Or you can ask questions to try to stop from failing."

Stan laughed. "Are you in love with my daughter and don't want to fall flat on your butt in front of her?"

"She'd just laugh at me if I did fall," he said.

"She would, but then she'd give you a hand and help you up. Years ago, she wouldn't. Even months ago, I'm not sure she would have."

"So she's changed since she's met me?" he asked.

"She has. In a lot of positive ways. She isn't going to admit any feelings easily though if that is what you are thinking," Stan said.

"I figured as much. But you've told me enough."

Scott brought his lunch over and set it on the bar. Colt pulled his wallet out and Stan, said, "On the house."

Colt threw a twenty on the bar. "A tip for the advice."

Stan shook his head. "Good luck with her. I like you. I liked you when I met you months ago even though you were representing the guy suing me. I told Nikki to look beyond that and she didn't want to."

"I think she has now," Colt said. "At least I hope so."

LOW AND SNEAKY

But that was short lived because when Nikki found out by mistake on Thanksgiving Day that Colt had been talking to her father, she blew up at the end of the long shift.

“What do you mean you wished Colt good luck with me? When?”

“He stopped over to see me a few days ago. We talked.”

“About me?” she asked with her hands on her hips.

“Well, not really.”

“Yes, really,” she said. Here she thought what she and Colt had was good. Better than she’d had with other men and then she finds out he is going behind her back to question her father about her. Talk about low and sneaky.

“You’re getting worked up over nothing just like you always do,” he said. “And we’ve got customers here so pull yourself together.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. She wiped a hand in front of her face and put a smile on. “I can behave when I need to.”

“Now you’re acting like a child. Let’s close down and we can talk about this.”

But she didn’t want to. She went around and thanked the last two tables that were just getting ready to leave,

then started to clean up the bar.

They had no idea what to expect for the holiday but had been advertising it on social media all week long. She should have figured that with as busy as it was last night, today would be a repeat of it. She'd be here tomorrow, but the rest of the weekend the bar would be busy without her. She needed a break.

She was happy for her father. He needed this in his life.

Why couldn't she find what she needed in her life though?

"Have you calmed down at all?" her father asked her twenty minutes later. The last of the customers were gone even from the bar. Scott and Logan were cleaning the kitchen and she was putting chairs on tables to sweep and mop.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Which we know you're not," her father said. "I'm not sure what the big deal is. He came in here and got some lunch and we talked. He cares about you and if you opened your eyes you'd see that. He's a good man. One that a father would be happy to see their daughter end up with."

She whipped around suddenly. "So that's it? You are trying to unload me? I don't need a man to take care of me and you know it."

Her father sighed. "I don't know what bug crawled up your butt, but that isn't it. I'm saying he's a good guy if you would just give him a chance."

She had given Colt a chance. Lots of them. And she let her guard down and now she finds out that Colt is talking to her father behind her back. Why, when he had no problem shutting up half the time? So there was no reason he couldn't just talk to her.

That didn't fly with her that he couldn't come to her.

"You don't need to get involved in my affairs," she said.

"Just like your mother," her father said, going back behind the bar.

She was sick and tired of always hearing that too when they fought. She didn't even know what it meant other than she felt like it was an insult.

"If you hated Mom so much why didn't you move on? It seems to me that you only say I'm like her when you don't like the way I'm acting."

"Don't talk bad about your mother that way," her father said.

"You never talk well about her to me," she argued. "You only bring her up when you're picking on me or not happy with my behavior. You make it sound like those are the only traits I've gotten from her. Here I thought for all these years you were single because you were still in love with her, but it sure the hell doesn't seem that way."

"I loved your mother," her father said. "We didn't have the perfect marriage. I didn't want her gone all the time. I was scared of exactly what happened. She promised me she'd leave when you were born and she put in another tour."

This was the first she was hearing any of this. "Why?"

"Because she said it was in her blood. Do you want to know that we fought about whether or not to stay married? That I felt she was selfish and put her career and her life ahead of mine and yours? Fine, we did. But don't mistake how much I loved her. And when she finally said she was done, I believed it."

"And then she died."

"Yeah, she did," he said. "And the reason I never dated again was because I had you. And I had to put you first."

"And you didn't want someone else to leave you?" she asked.

"Funny how you can say that to me but can't figure it out for yourself," her father said and walked away from her.

It wasn't the same thing in her eyes though, but her father was at the other end of the bar and that meant he was done talking about this.

That was fine with her. She was over it too.
At least until she confronted Colt tomorrow.



THE LAST THING Colt expected was hurricane Nikki to come crashing through his door on Friday morning while he was working from home.

The office was closed, but he was trying to get as much work done as he could so he could find some time to spend with Nikki this weekend.

He'd thought about his conversation with Stan earlier in the week and realized that maybe he should talk to Nikki more. Tell her how he was feeling and slowly get her to learn to trust him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She was all but marching into his office off the front door.

"How dare you go behind my back and talk to my father about me."

"What?" he asked.

"My father slipped last night and said how you were talking earlier this week and that he wished you luck with me. Then we got into a fight because I was pissed off that you did that."

"That I talked to your father?" he asked calmly. There was a time to lose his patience, but it didn't seem he should do it before he found out all the facts or how many bugs were stuck up her ass. "You're pissed I went to the pub and talked to your dad? I wasn't aware that wasn't allowed."

"Don't be cute. You were talking about me. Talking behind my back."

"I'd hardly say we were talking behind your back," he said, standing up. "It started out innocent enough. Your father loves you and cares for you and I think he wanted to feel things out with me just as much."

"Oh, he was all about you being a great guy that any father would hand his daughter off to."

"And that would have pissed you off to hear that about me since we know there was a time you couldn't stand the sound of my name."

She ground her teeth. "You're going to keep throwing that in my face, aren't you?"

"It seems you want to keep throwing things in my face, so why not? Here I thought I was doing the right thing and going over to see if your father approved of me. If he had any issues with us dating."

"I don't need his approval."

"Oh, you're wrong. You need a lot of approval in life, but your pride won't let you take it. It won't let you ask for help. It won't let you depend on anyone. It won't even let you love me."

The minute the last part was out of his mouth, he wished he could have taken it back, but it was too late.

She was standing there with her jaw open. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Oh no. You threw it out there and you think you can drop it?"

"You're just going to throw it back in my face," he said.

"Is that what you think of me?" she asked.

"I don't know what to think of you. Some women would think it was great I went to their only parent that they said was all they had in the world and tried to make sure I had his approval. But not you. I don't think *you* know what you want."

"I don't know why this has to be turned around on me," she said.

"Because you're the one that came marching in here like a bat out of hell with propellers on your back. So that's it? You're pissed I talk to your father? Anything else? We might as well just clear the air at this point. Give me all your ground rules so that I don't mess up again."

Her eyes started to fill with tears and he wasn't sure what was going on. "This is too much for me."

"What is? Someone that wants to talk to you? Someone that doesn't want to fight but wants to understand you?"

"Yeah," she said. "No one ever talked to me before."

"I get that," he said. "But you're an adult now and there is no reason you can't start to make changes in your life. You're not the little kid waiting for other people to come back to you."

"That's low," she said.

"Maybe it is. But maybe you need to hear it. Maybe too many people have tiptoed around you in life because they were afraid to upset you. Newsflash. I'm not afraid to upset the apple cart. But if this isn't what you want, then tell me now and I can get off the hamster wheel trying to figure you out."

"I need time," she said.

"Then take it," he said "But don't leave me hanging too long. There is only so long I'll chase a carrot."

She turned and walked out the door, but didn't slam it this time, the way he would like to as he resisted putting his fist through the wall.

When he went back to his office he saw her sitting in her car with her face in her hands. He figured she was crying and wanted to go out and comfort her but knew that would probably cause another fight.

It didn't matter. Before he could have gotten out the front door, she was pulling away.

CLEAR THE AIR

Over a week later, Nikki was pulling into her apartment after school on Monday when she saw her father's truck next to her door.

She felt her shoulders drop, but parked, shut her car off, grabbed her bag and got out. "What are you doing here?"

"Coming to talk to you. I think we need to clear the air."

She and her father didn't fight often, but when they did, they both gave the other the silent treatment until one of them caved.

She'd wanted to cave and talk to him after her fight with Colt but then realized her father would probably agree with Colt and she didn't want to hear that.

So instead she'd kept to herself for over a week, letting it all build and making herself ill.

She wasn't eating, she wasn't sleeping, and though she saw her father when she worked at the pub, they were cordial for those around and that was it.

It was time to face the music now.

"Yeah, we do. Come on in." Her father followed her up the stairs to her place. She put her stuff down. "I want to say I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things about Mom to you. It was low on my end and immature."

"You weren't wrong," he said. "I've got just as many faults as you. I'm to blame for a lot of things in life. You were right. I never talked about your mother much because even though I still love her to this day, I was pissed at her."

"You're still pissed," she said.

"I guess I am. And I started to think that, without knowing it, I transferred all that to you. We should have been there more for each other and in the end we put up too many walls."

"I've been told that recently," she said.

"Colt," her father said. "Seems to me he's affecting us both. Maybe not in a bad way even though in the beginning it sure the hell felt like it."

"I know. I all but attacked him on Friday morning for talking to you. He tried to stay calm, but he got pissed too. He threw some things in my face and it hurt to hear them, but he was right."

"I won't ask for details. That's between you two. Your mother and I had our fair share of fights I wouldn't want anyone to know about. But if you love him or care for him, you have to work it out. You can't do what you and I do and ignore things and hope it goes away. It's not healthy."

"It's not," she said. "I haven't talked to him in over a week and I feel like crap about it."

"He hasn't reached out to you?" her father said.

"No. I'm the one that said I needed time and he told me to take it. But he also said he'd only wait so long."

Her father laughed. "Good for him."

"Yeah. He won't put up with my bull."

"I think your problem in life has been that you wouldn't put up with anyone else's bull and left before you got too close. And if someone was getting too close to you, you'd put these walls up and they'd walk away without bothering to chip at the stone. Then you'd blame them for walking away and not staying to fight for you."

"I think so," she said. "I realized that myself. It's not easy to look back at all my failed relationships and realize the part I played in them."

"Everyone has failed relationships and it's never just one sided. It's what you can learn from them. If you can grow from it."

"I know," she said. "I'd already decided to go talk to Colt today. I'll see if he has time tonight. I need to clear the air with him too and see if I messed up so much that I ruined what we had."

"I don't think you did. But that is just me guessing."

"Because you like him," she said.

"I've never made a secret of that. Are you and I good?" he asked, holding his arms out for her to go in for a hug.

"Yeah," she said, and stepped into his arms. "We don't always have to say all the words to know what the other means. I'm spoiled that way and shouldn't assume that men I date get me enough to not have to talk it out."

"No, you shouldn't assume that," he said.

And several hours later, she'd worked up the nerve to go get down on her knees and beg Colt to forgive her if it came to that.

She'd heard what everyone had been saying for weeks and knew she was wrong.

She knocked on his door and he opened it. "You walked in last time no problem," he said.

"I wasn't so sure I'd be welcome."

"You are," he said. "I was starting to wonder how long you were going to hold out."

"I've wanted to talk sooner, but I haven't been in the right frame of mind. First, I'm sorry. And please let me just say everything before you do."

"I'll try to hold my tongue, but we know it's hard."

He was half smiling when he said it, which gave her hope. "You're right about a lot of things. I'm scared of getting close to someone and having them leave me. I put

walls up so I don't have to worry. I want to leave before they have a chance to. I show my worst side first to see if they can handle me."

"Have I been passing?" he asked.

She snorted. "Mostly. But I still failed. I've made a lot of missteps and I'll take the blame. You're trying a lot more than I am."

"You're trying plenty," he said. "But you're skittish."

"I am," she said. "My father and I had it out too and then we made up. There were things he'd never said to me before and I realized that played a part in how I act. He felt bad about it and I didn't want him to."

"Do I get to know what that is or is it private?"

"I want to share it with you. I want you to understand. Maybe you'll understand me better too."

"I like to think I understand you well, but obviously not well enough."

"I don't know that anyone does. One thing that came out of my father and me fighting was that he always said I was just like my mother when I was acting bad in his eyes. My whole life. I finally asked if he really hated her."

"I'm sure his answer was he was angry at her for leaving him but he still loved her deeply."

"See," she said starting to cry. "You understand that and saw it when I didn't. When maybe he didn't either."

"Because sometimes it takes someone on the outside to see it."

"Maybe. But he felt that he played a part in how I was in relationships because he didn't try again for fear of being left. I'm not sure if that is the case or not."

"No one will know for sure," Colt said.

"No. But the other thing I realized was that you've never given up on me. You've never let me walk away completely. I've given you crap. I've said things to you that aren't nice. But you're still here. And you're still trying."

"Why do you think that is?" he asked.

"I want to guess or hope it's because you love me. When you slipped and said it I could see your face and you wished you hadn't, but you weren't taking it back."

"No reason to take it back if it's what I felt. But if you don't feel the same way, then I'm strong enough to move on."

"I'm not sure I'm strong enough to move on without you though."

He moved toward her and wiped the tear that was running down her face and then pulled her into his arms.
"Do you love me, Nikki?"

"I think I do. And I'm so afraid I ruined everything."

"You didn't. I love how outspoken you are. I love how bold you are. You're going to say things you might wish you didn't, just like me."

"You don't do that often. You've got a lot more restraint than me."

He laughed. "Years of practice." He ran his hand over her head and kissed her on the temple. "Are you willing to give me another chance?"

"I think that is a question I should have for you," she said.

"Then ask me it," he said. "And tell me what you really feel."

"I love you, Colt. I'm sorry for everything. From hating you in the beginning to being immature recently. I'm not sorry for loving you and I hope you will give me another chance to prove it to you."

"I will," he said. "Because I love you too and when you love someone enough, you fight for them. You don't walk away. And if they walk away from you, you chase them down."

She smiled. "Were you going to chase me down?"

"You had two more days to come to your senses, then it was time for me to get to work."

"I can only imagine what that might have entailed."

"Guess we'll never know now."

"Nope. Because I'm not going to be that stupid again."

"Oh," he said, "I'm sure you will be. You wouldn't be the woman I love if we didn't go at it now and again."

"Well, there is always makeup sex."

"Yes, there is!"

EPILOGUE

Nine Months Later

“How DID IT GO?” Nikki asked when Colt walked into the pub. One year ago he filed the papers to become a ten percent owner in Nikki’s. Six months prior to that, he’d met the woman of his dreams, only she hated him too much to know that.

Who would have thought the past year would be this much of a whirlwind?

“It was great. You should have seen Janet’s face when she lost in court.”

“I wish I could have been there.”

“You were in school. It was fine. But man, it’s a sight I won’t unsee for a long time.”

Janet and her clients had been dragging this out for months. When she realized Michael and his parents weren’t going to settle and were going to court, they tried to find any dirt on the family they could.

But everything they found, he disproved and had more on her client.

What they didn't know was he had a video that was going to show exactly what a scammer Janet's client was.

"I can't believe it either. For so much time to pass before someone finally realized they had the accident on their phone," Nikki said.

"They said they didn't know. It wasn't until they were upgrading their son's phone that they went through and were looking at things that they saw the video. The boy didn't even know what he was filming as much as he was just filming his brother in the yard next door."

Then the parents realized in the background was the accident and how it was very clear there were no lights on the car that Michael hit. It was a residential neighborhood close to Michael's house, but there were no streetlights. Two kids were in the yard playing and it was all caught on camera.

Michael hit a car in the middle of the road that had no lights on, no brake lights even though the driver claimed they had just stopped. The video did show the car moving and then slowing down past the house and sitting there until Michael slammed into it. Then the car behind them hit Michael.

"It's just crazy how those things happen," she said.

"Tell me about it. It seems to me that videos are the way to bring about justice for me. This one with Michael. The other was your case."

"What?" she asked. They were in the back while she was looking over the menu for specials, but he knew she was going up front soon. She wasn't working, just here for dinner. Or so she thought.

"The video that Sheryl had taken. That was in evidence, but it was leaked out after the trial ended."

"Did you do that?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't."

"But you know who did?" she asked.

"Maybe. And it doesn't matter. That video was supposed to get business going again for you and your father."

"But our business was done by then," she said.

"It was. But that just meant I had to find another way to help you guys out."

"Hence the partnership. So it was all about my father?" she asked lightly punching his arm.

"Yes and no. It was about both of you, but I was drawn to you more. Your fiery spirit. Your gorgeous body. Your outspoken nature."

"I might have had my eye on you too, but I couldn't let anyone know."

"Because I was everything you couldn't stand in life," he said.

"Stupidly," she agreed. "But we've moved beyond that."

"We have," he said. "Let's go get a table, unless there is something else you needed to do back here?"

"No. I just like to look around and check things out. I'm not working as much, but it's hard to let go too."

"Your father is thriving here and will continue to do so," he said.

"With the help of you."

"I don't do all that much and you know it," he said.

"You do enough," she said and then turned to walk out into the pub. When she got past the bar she stopped at the balloons. "What's that?"

"Go check it out," he said.

She moved closer and saw they said Happy First Anniversary. "It's not a year yet," she said. "Who brought these?"

"It's a year that Colt and I signed the contract though," Stan said.

"Oh, I hadn't realized that," she said.

"No need to," Colt said. "I pay attention to the details."

"Figures."

"Just like this detail," he said, pulling a ring out of his pocket and putting it in front of her face. "I figured this was the best time to do it. In front of your father with his blessing. In the bar that is his and the place he loves. This is for a new partnership with a different Brewster. Nikki, will you marry me and be my wife?"

"Oh my God," she said. "That ring is huge."

"Nikki," Stan said. "You don't leave a man waiting like that. What is wrong with you?"

"There is nothing wrong with me," she said. "Colt knows I love him. He knows I'm going to say yes and he knows that we are equal and that is why he didn't get on his knee to ask."

"You're damn straight," Colt said. "But you still didn't answer me."

"You know the answer, but I'll say it the minute you put that beautiful ring on my finger." He took the ring out of his palm and slid it on and then looked at her with a big grin on his face. "Yes. I'll be your wife!"

"Thank God," he said. "I thought for a second I might have to get on my knee after all."

THE END!

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